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The invention of the Child Consumer: What is at stake for marketing practice and research?

by

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Introduction: The child: a target for marketing management

In this chapter, we aim at giving a rapid overview of the social conditions that lead to the emergence of a new category for managerial action in our Western post-modern societies: the child as a consumer.

In a first part, we very roughly lay emphasis on two main evolutions that seem to have smoothly prepared the grounds for a strong connection between children and consumption:

- firstly, the contemporary focus on childhood in our societies, witnessed through several institutional advances, which has lead to a reconsideration of children's abilities, and
- secondly, the mundane nature of consumption practices that pervade extensively into the various realms of social relationships.

Through their combination, these changes have opened the possibility of enacting the child as a full consumer in our contemporary world. Consequently, this social construction has strengthened the emergence of children-oriented markets and has reinforced the need to adapt usual marketing techniques to deal with this promising, although difficult, commercial target.

In a second part, we attempt at characterizing the field of children's consumerism as a complex open system which is partly shaped and transformed by managerial action. When aiming at children as consumers, marketing practice has to face a bundle of intermingled dimensions which increase uncertainty as far as brand loyalty and profitability are concerned. Moreover, children-oriented commercial activities appear to constitute a highly ambiguous and controversial field upon which several institutions fiercely confront their ideological standpoints. On such a sensitive topic, forms of resistance to the ideology associated to mass consumption emerge with unusual intensity, thus ending in a deep reappraisal both of marketing managers' responsibility and of the long term contribution of marketing itself as a social institution.

Our concluding remarks call on for a transformative agenda in marketing research in order to avoid reducing the child to a mere "*ego consumans*" (Baudrillard 1970 : 121) and to promote socially responsible research practices and ethically embedded theoretical frameworks likely to contribute to a meaningful renovation of the marketing discipline as a whole.

Part I – The progressive connection of Children with Consumption

1.1 – Enacting children as actors in consumption practices

The actual meaning of the notion of childhood depends strongly on other contextual factors that coexist at a precise time of history within a given society. The rising importance of the child within our contemporary world appears as a social construction activated by several sociological trends and the diffusion of new scientific knowledge divulged by psychologists.

1.1.1 – Reconsidering the child: agency and creativity

From a sociological standpoint, the child appears to be constructed as a project that defines and legitimizes the family nucleus. In contrast with previous social practices, the contemporary focus on the child can be considered as the building block of family relationships. Therefore, family is no more conceived of as a long lasting and unquestionable institution but becomes a kind of temporary social arrangement in order to welcome and raise children... In addition, the model of parent-children relationships is transformed from an authoritarian model centred on the “*pater familias*” into a more egalitarian way of handling intra-family relationships. Children are invited by their parents to take part in certain decisions and to give their own opinions on the social activities the family nucleus should be involved in, such as for instance holidays, sports, leisure, etc. (Singly, 1996 ; Singly et al., 2004).

From a psychological standpoint, several advances have led to acknowledge the child as a full person (Dolto, 1985). Several works underlined that long lasting trauma undergone by adults often have their origin in early childhood. Other works laid special emphasis on the importance of taking into account the child’s own wishes and to avoid creating situations likely to provoke severe frustrations and difficulties in socialization. This psychological vulgate has been actively widespread through the media, all the magazines aimed at parents and the explosion of websites dedicated to give advices to parents in order to raise properly their children.

In a nutshell, the main consequences of these far too roughly sketched evolutions are threefold:

→ *The recognition of children’s agency*: The child is considered as a person and is able to make his (her) own decisions. Then, parents are advised to ask for his (her) opinion in some circumstances before making important or very ordinary decisions...like purchases. Some practices which characterize children’s behaviour like zapping TV programs, the willingness to experiment new products, the incapacity to achieve brand loyalty, etc. can be analyzed as proper decisions made by children aimed at exploring the social and cultural context they live in.

→ *The recognition of children’s cultures*: Children are able to create their own social rules and to divert words and objects belonging to the realm of adulthood to generate their own socially shared meanings and cultures. Very often, children invent cultural practices that are inaccessible to adults and aimed at resisting adults’ normative pressure. The heroes and celebrities they admire, the new forms of narratives they explore, the games and playing activities they are involved in, the possibilities brought by the technologies they learn to use,

etc. are constitutive elements of children's culture... quite distant sometimes from their parents' culture. (Buckingham, 2000)

→ *The importance of children's socialisation*: Birthday celebrations are a very emblematic form of children's socialization where the convenient social rules to be followed are not only defined by parents... but by the children themselves. Children's cultures develop their own rituals and other meaningful socializing events that often take place in the schoolyard or in different playgrounds. (Sirota, 1999 ; Cook et al., 2002)

The conjunction of these ideas that children have the capacity to decide their own activities, are quite creative in structuring their own cultures, and need to achieve a successful socialization, has prepared the grounds for the emergence of a new category for managerial action in contemporary society: the child as a consumer.

1.1.2 - Pragmatic evidence of the role children play in consumerism

Several consultancy firms have recently presented strong evidence of the growing importance of children's consumerism in our contemporary society. Children are depicted as holding an increasing purchase power and an ever growing influence on the household purchases, as well as having the capacity to transform the consumption habits of the household by introducing innovative products.

→ *Direct and indirect purchase power*: in 2000, American children spent about 155 billion dollars, but this amount drastically increases when their savings are included (Siegel et al., 2004)

In France, the consultancy firm Altavia Junium estimates that French children's purchasing power includes:

- 33,10 billion euros/year of direct purchase (with their own money);
- 2,85 billion for young people aged 11/17, without the possibility of official jobs;
- 8,38 billion for young people of 18/20 years old, considering that some of them work officially;
- 21,88 billion for the ones aged 21/24, considering that 47,1% of them work (Le Bigot et al., 2004)

→ *Discretionary spending*: The amounts of money directly handled by children have dramatically increased in the last years. Indeed, grand parents play an important role through the money they give to their grand children and the expenses they make for them are often an indirect help to their own children. The best way to develop consumption skills is to leave the child experiment by himself (herself). The dramatic rise in the amounts of pocket money given to children participates in this educational perspective. In that context, children have the opportunity to make purchases outside parental control. They can go often to see movies with friends, buy small toys, magazines, clothes, eat in fast-food restaurants with their friends, buy snacks and junk food, play on-line in cybercafés for a few hours, etc.

→ *Prescriptive power*: Children's influence on family purchases is constantly increasing. According to a survey by the French polling institute IPSOS in 2003¹, some parents acknowledge that their young child influences sometimes up to 80 % of their purchases in

¹ IPSOS-SOFINCO (2003), L'influence des enfants sur le budget familial – Etude européenne.
<http://www.ipsos.fr/CanalIpsos/articles/1109.asp?rubId=21>

certain categories of products (food, clothes, etc.) As children aged from 4 to 14 years spend daily 2h33 watching TV², it is possible to calculate that within one year, they are exposed to 26 000 advertisements as an average. Recent studies also demonstrate that babies are able to recognize logos from the age of 6 months and, that brands are among the first words a young child pronounces... Thus, brands are part of the cultural background in which children develop their early cognitive and social skills.

→ *The innovative behaviour of children*: As far as consumption is concerned, children act as innovators: through their prescriptive power, they manage to introduce new items in the household, cereals at breakfast for instance, and they also contribute to transform some consuming routines within the family. Children also appear to be experts - compared to adults – in the use of new technologies (mobile phones, satellite TV, consoles, Internet, video games, etc.) and they push their parents to consider the technical innovations offered by the market.

Beyond controversies about how realistic these figures pretend to be, consultancy firms have contributed to make children as a kind of new “Eldorado” that managerial action ought to conquer and colonize.

1.2 – The mundane nature of children’s consumerism...

Within the household, consuming is a very ordinary and routinised social activity. Little by little, children are gradually involved in several consumption processes with their parents or grand-parents, their siblings or peers, thus being naturally trained to become skilled consumers.

1.2.1 – Consumption: from rational decision-making to ordinary activity

In the field of marketing, the study of young consumers’ socialisation has developed on the basis of the knowledge established thanks to the study of the adult consumer’s buying behaviour who is characterised by his decisional autonomy, his logical skills to compare the attributes of the products, his capacity to master the language to explain the reasons behind his choices and the relative stability of his preferences. The study of the child-consumer has been organised by comparison with the adult and naturally resulted in underlining the cognitive, linguistic and behavioural limits of the child compared to the adult (La Ville, 2004). The restricted semantic field that the child masters does not enable it to explain precisely its preferences, these being based rather on a visual or oral memory or on emotional reactions. The child privileges the emotional register over pure logic to appreciate and compare the products, which reflects its preference for familiar brands (Hite et al. 1995). As a result, the reflexes of marketing managers with regard to persuasive communication techniques, brand recognition and enhancement of consumer loyalty must be suspended in the case of a child consumer.

To approach the meaning that consumer practices assume for the child, it seems necessary to achieve a shift in perspectives, and to move from buyer behaviour to detailed accounts of consumption practices (Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2002).

² MEDIAMETRIE (2004), Durée d’écoute par individu de la télévision, December.

The study of consumption has emerged as in the mid -1980's with a strong focus on the negative aspects of private consumption (Baudrillard, 1970). Postmodernist thought deeply transformed this emergent understanding of consumption by exploring the dreams, images and pleasures associated with consumer culture (Maffesoli, 1996). Nevertheless, this interpretation of the symbolic and communicative significance of consumption shed light on its spectacular side, while leaving in the shadow less flamboyant or visible practices : «*Too much emphasis has been placed upon :*

- *extraordinary rather than ordinary items,*
- *conspicuous rather than inconspicuous consumption*
- *individual choice rather than contextual and collective constraint*
- *conscious, rational decision-making rather than routine, conventional and repetitive conduct*
- *decisions to purchase rather than practical contexts of appropriation and use*
- *commodified rather than other types of exchange*
- *considerations of personal identity rather than collective identification.»*

(Gronow and Warde, 2000 : 4)

This initial development of the field of consumption studies might explain why the role children play in consumption has been hardly considered for such a long while. Lead in their explorations by the principle of consumer sovereignty, consumption studies were centred on adult meaning construction and symbolic communication (Bourdieu 1984 ; Douglas 1996) and did not consider children as skilled and reflexive enough consumers to master the meaning of the consumption practices they were involved in. Unable to meet the requirements of such a consumer sovereignty principle – an autonomous capacity to decide by themselves the means for the satisfaction of their wants -, children seem to have been left apart from consumption studies for several decades.

Considering the mundane nature of consumption practices allows a reintegration of underestimated dimensions - like routines and ordinary products - and calls for a detailed account of some marginal actors' intervention in consumption practices. Some room opened then to take into account the way children participate to the household consumption habits and how they influence each other's preferences and satisfaction. In that perspective, we propose to regard child consumption as a mediated social activity (La Ville and Tartas, 2005) and not as a pure decision-making process, the expression of a structure of preferences or the result of a process of socialisation. If each one of these dimensions is relevant by itself, the absence of controlled connections between them induces questionable forms of reductionism.

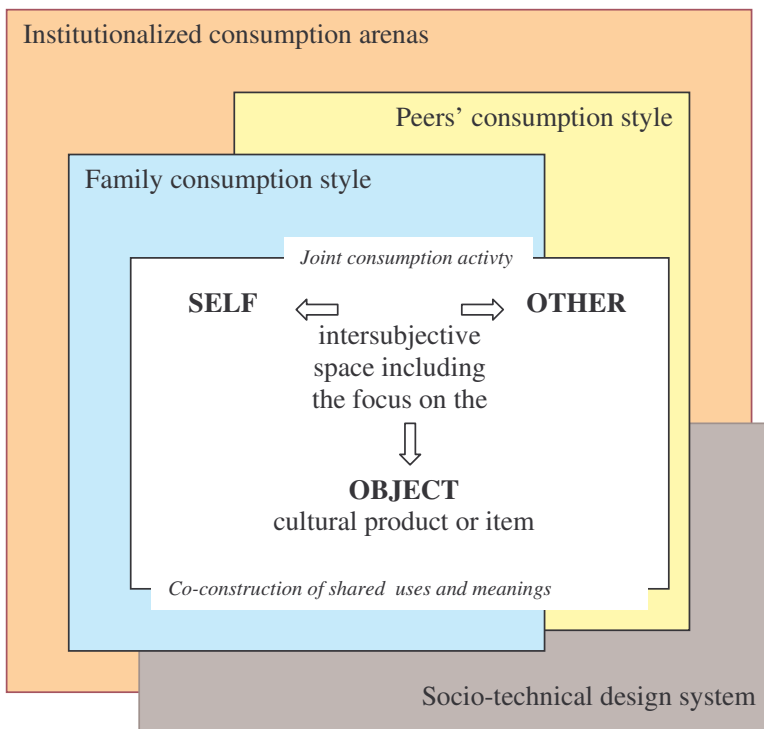
1.2.2 – Consumption: a mediated and mediating joint activity

We propose to call upon the concepts of "*joint activity*" and of "*cultural mediator*" suggested by Jerome Bruner (1990) and Lev Vygotsky (1933/1985), in order to study child consumption. Lev Vygotsky brilliantly contended that children's ordinary activities are always mediated through cultural tools such as language, symbols, techniques, signs, categories, etc. and by an adult or a more experienced child.

→ *The child does not enter the world of consumption alone:* The entry into the consumer society constitutes a long training period during which the child passes from a situation of total dependence, in particular with respect to his parents, to the progressive construction of forms of autonomy to develop its own practices of consumption. Thus, child consumption constitutes an activity during which the child does not find itself on its own, but is supervised

and guided by others to learn how to solve a certain number of conceptual and practical problems. Consequently, the relevant unit of analysis is certainly not the isolated child confronted with a problem to be dealt with, but rather the joint activity within an interaction "child - adult", or of an interaction "child - more experienced child " or of a small group, confronted with a problem (purchase decision, use of the object...). Within this framework, the child is clearly integrated into a social body which at the same time exceeds it, seeks it out and reassures it as it learns.

→ *The child does not enter the world of consumption directly:* According to Jerome Bruner, inter-subjectivity can not be reduced to a one-to-one situation as it includes the object on which mutual attention will be able to focus itself. This inter-subjectivity constitutes the foundation of the joint activity thanks to which the child discovers the world of objects under the guidance of the adult or a more experienced child. This perspective leads to consider that the other is always present in the activity of consumption as practised by a child and to conceive child consumption as a co-elaborated activity. Indeed, it is by engaging in a joint activity with a partner that the child gradually explores all the potential significance of the object being used.



→ *As a mediated activity, consumption is also situated:* The meaning of children's consumption is framed both by the normative demands of the family consumption style and the normative requirements of the peers' consumption styles. The child has to learn to deal with the conflictive requirements held by the different social groups it belongs to (Page and Ridgway, 2001). In doing so, it develops its rhetorical and negotiation skills to obtain satisfaction or has sometimes to accept some frustration. But beyond these face to face relationships, children's consumerism is also enabled and constrained by wider social systems including:

- the institutionalized consumption arenas (like distribution and retailing, regulatory requirements, admitted sales techniques, sales on Internet, cultural events like Christmas, Easter, Carnival festivities, etc.) and
- the on-going innovativeness of the socio-technical system that allows new possibilities to design products aimed at children. For instance “smart toys” or interactive cuddly toys like “Furbies”³, as they mix electronics and traditional techniques, reflect in part the historical development of the toy industry and the new possibilities offered by technical innovation.

→ *Child consumption as a mediated and also mediating social activity* : If child consumption can be considered as a mediated activity – through the guidance of an adult or a more experienced child, through language, through packaging and advertising, etc. -, it is extremely important to understand that it is also a mediating social activity. This means that when participating in a consumption activity, the child learns a lot of things far beyond consumption itself. When choosing a gift for a birthday party for instance, the child learns that different social rules have to be called on if the beneficiary is a boy, or a girl, or an adult, etc. Moreover, when consuming or using an item, the child discovers and learns plenty of important notions concerning social life and its normative requirements. When using / consuming a product, the child develops his own skills by exerting his (her) capacities on a concrete object. From this point of view, the child is an apprentice-consumer who must gradually master a complex set of social skills:

- to learn a vocabulary and linguistic expressions directly attached to situations of consumption,
- to differentiate the particular situations of consumption and the values which are associated to them,
- to collect useful information concerning the product to be bought,
- to develop capacities of categorisation and comparison of the products according to conventional criteria,
- to develop a capacity of regulation depending on the circumstances and products,
- to develop a socially acceptable use of the purchased product, object or service...

As a consequence, children’s consumerism cannot be reduced to a mere purchase decision: educational and social dimensions are at the very heart of the long process allowing children take part in consumption social practices. A characteristic that might explain why parents are so watchful when choosing a product or trying to help their child resisting peers’ pressure...

Part II – Children’s consumerism: The New Frontier of managerial practice?

2.1 – Children’s consumerism: a complex open system...

From a managerial standpoint, the field of children’s consumerism can be conceptualized as a system of social practices which develops at the cross roads of five strongly intermingled complementary subsystems (La Ville, 2004):

2.1.1 – Five intertwined co-evolving sub-systems

- *A relational system*: it covers the relationships established with all the members of the family and especially with the parents, the siblings, the grand-parents, but also with persons in

³ A toy by HASBRO.

charge of raising the child, the professors, the peers...

- *An institutional system*: it includes the different institutions in charge of welcoming the child and providing him (her) with all the necessary skills to successfully integrate in a given society. The institutional dimension refers to the notion of social role: at school, the child increases his (her) knowledge, but he (she) also learns to behave as a pupil; within his family, the child learns to differentiate the role and responsibilities reserved for parents and those reserved for children...

- *A plurimedia system*: it encompasses all the media that the child learns to use in the course of his (her) development. If television stands out as the preferred media of young kids, the latter learn very rapidly to use computers, to read magazines, to listen to the radio, to record music, to send e-mails, to send SMS on mobiles, to surf on Internet...

- *A narrative system*: it gathers together stories, fairy tales, narrations, fiction heroes, characters, and other celebrities in real life, etc. that the child knows and recognizes. This narrative system offers concrete and symbolic markers to which the child refers when trying to explore the meaning of what he (she) lives, to express him(her)self and to exercise its judgment capacity.

- *An economic system*: it includes all the children-oriented markets, the different regulatory frames, the different actors intervening in the dynamics of new product design process, distribution, marketing communication, etc. This system partly covers the socio technical design system and the institutionalized consumption contexts previously mentioned. This system also includes consumers' associations and all the protesters who strongly fight against capitalist ideology.

Then, the field of children's consumerism can be approached as a social construction to which several institutions contribute: consultants, industrials, governmental bodies, families, media, consumers' associations, etc. As it is simultaneously embedded in all these subsystems, managerial action aimed at selling and marketing products to children is a quite complex task.

It is undeniable for instance that managerial decisions have a direct impact on children's cultures. A worldwide success such as Pokémon, not only commits children to new forms of play, but also becomes part of their cultural background, leading to a redefinition of playing. Henceforth, the launch of new products or toys has to take into account the transformation of playing modes achieved by the success of Pokémon (Tobin et al., 2004). The same happens in the video game industry: a blockbuster like The Sims – 60 % of players are girls - is bound to profoundly influence girl's future expectations concerning video games. Moreover, Dad and Mum are constantly losing ground in the ranking of persons young children admire most and identify with. The marketing efforts to promote celebrities and cartoon characters lead them to become the main persons children look up to. It is also obvious that managerial actions have a direct impact on children's way of socializing and lifestyles. The development of new forms of socialization – through TV programmes, video games and Internet - has smoothly led children to privilege virtual playgrounds and become more sedentary. Having fun with sports is nowadays synonymous with playing a game by Electronic Arts! (Kline, 2004) The roots of the phenomenon of "Lolitas" – with its consubstantial magazines, cosmetics and fashion shops adapted to tween girls, etc. – can be partly found in active marketing campaigns aimed at girls aged from 8 to 12 years old (Russel and Tyler, 2004)

2.1.2 – Managerial decision has to cope with complex trade-offs

From a managerial standpoint, taking part in the field of children's consumerism and contributing to its long term evolution is a difficult endeavour. The trade-offs between the five subsystems are so intense that they redesign the scope of activities firms have to cover in order to play a significant part in children-oriented markets. We can sketch five major changes that are transforming managerial practice on these markets:

→ *The need for a multidimensional innovation:* If we examine the most appealing successes on children-oriented markets in the last ten years, we observe that they result from a multidimensional design. In order to market toys to young kids, it becomes imperative to launch simultaneously an animated series on TV... When launching a video game aiming at adolescents, it is necessary to anticipate cultural trends and actively engage in a competitive search for high potential character licenses from the cinema or the publishing industries. So, strategic awareness and vigilance has to focus on weak signals (Ansoff, 1984) likely to indicate the possible emergence of a consistent cultural world meaningful to children. But understanding the emerging cultural trends likely to shape children's lives is not easy at all as they can disappear very quickly if competing worlds are more attractive.

→ *Plurimedia marketing management:* The product becomes only a part, a piece of a broader cultural context meaningful to children. Toys, video games, animated TV series, animated feature films are now strongly linked as they contribute to create a meaningful and consistent cultural world for kids. So, marketing management can not be reduced to communication and promotional efforts to launch the product. It has to build a complex set of relationships with partners from other industries to conceive and implement an actual strategic plan in order to exploit a property (a character or a product) in the long run through different media. The possibilities for greater diversity in entertainment activities offered to kids are therefore constrained by the pressure both to cast a wide promotional net over a mass audience with a single product and to consolidate brand identity through licensing agreements (Kline et al., 2003).

→ *Enriching core competences:* From a strategic standpoint, the main difficulty is to establish and sustain a network of complementary assets and idiosyncratic know-how in order to enrich core competences and enable a multidimensional design of a meaningful cultural world aimed at children. The multiple buyouts that have taken place in recent years – most of them leading to bitter failures – show how difficult it is to integrate different industrial traditions in order to meet children's expectations. Diversification is always a difficult managerial attempt as the cultural distance between a producer of cultural goods (TV series or animated feature films) - who privileges artistic content, and a toy manufacturer - whose concerns are mainly industrial and mass market promotional techniques - might be sometimes insuperable...

→ *Problems of rhythm and pace in decision making:* In some situations, a firm can originate the innovation...and try to increase its long term value. But in other circumstances, the company will have to behave as a follower... and then its own evolution will depend on the rhythm and pace of innovation imposed by its partner. The example of the difficulties of LEGO in the last years can illustrate this phenomenon. Another difficulty is to be competent enough to understand the latest technical advances in different media – media convergence or not? - and to successfully bet on the best technology for the future. Another difficult stake consists in being able to adapt to the different standards imposed by different countries. To preserve its technical independence, China for instance is establishing its own standards in

DVD, mobile phones, etc. Moreover, character licensing and its subsequent validation processes can really hinder global reactivity of the licensees and endanger the capacity of achieving an efficient merchandising.

→ *Problems of scale in risk taking*: If the long term exploitation of a cultural property is a key to achieve a successful and profitable strategy, then, the best thing to do is to create and promote an original cultural world. Two French toy manufacturers - SMOBY that creates a new product line “Cotoons” for young kids as well as BERCHET which launches “Les Amis de la Forêt” on same age target, have chosen to promote simultaneously figurines and TV animated series. Because of the necessary extended promotional net to create brand awareness, the initial investments are drastically increased as well as the risks induced in case of failure. Moreover, when LEGO pays a high amount of royalties to obtain the licence for Harry Potter or Star Wars, it concentrates risk taking on one or two expensive options, leaving other possibilities for new product design unexplored...

2.2 – ...desperately searching for meaning.

When the first child is due within a couple, then the search for meaning in consumerism is bound to change. When there is a child in a household, consumption habits change and new considerations are taken into account when choosing a product. And nowadays, it is not only a matter of nostalgic attitude that would lead parents to choose products emblematic of their own childhood. It is a far more profound evolution as consumers are now quite experienced and able to go beyond marketing rhetoric to check important information in their own perspective. When buying products for their wanted child, parents are likely to start asking different questions about brands and products, as for instance:

- What is the quality of the ingredients included in that meal prepared for my child?
- Under which conditions is manufactured that toy or this sportswear article aimed at children?
- What is the actual educational value of this expensive toy aimed at fostering the learning skills of my child?
- Is it appropriate to expose my child to violent entertainment programmes on TV or on video games?
- What kind of ecological choices are made by firms that proclaim they want to offer their best to children?
- In what conditions we will leave the planet to our children?

2.2.1 – Children’s consumerism: a privileged ground for resistance

The field of children’s consumerism constitutes indeed a privileged ground for ideological and legal battles aimed at challenging the foundations of the dominant order capitalist society imposes on citizens.

Michel de Certeau’s analysis of consumption (1988) is oriented towards the ordinary practices of the consumers, who are defined as users of goods imposed on them by producers. Indeed, as an offer of products to the consumers, production entails a logic of domination towards which consumers resist by developing inventive attitudes and practices. By mirroring consumption and reading, Michel de Certeau reveals the two sides of consumption: on the one side, consuming entails a form of acceptance of an imposed offer of goods, while, on the other side, consumers are neither passive nor docile, they experience freedom, creativity and pleasure – as readers do, in their consumption practices. In that perspective, meaningful

practice is neither determined nor captured by the set of social rules in which it develops: it calls up a variety of hardly conscious, though crafty, tactics. Focusing on tactics sheds light on the creativity through which groups or individuals escape the "nets of discipline" and resist the logic imposed upon them. Multiple tactics appear through a creative bricolage and reveal the extent to which ordinary intelligence is inseparable from everyday struggles and the pleasure they provide. As a consequence, studying the practice of consumption implies paying more attention to consumers' "poaching ability", the multiple ways through which, in their everyday activities, they understand, use and transform the dominant orders that are imposed on them.

Consumers also organize themselves in consumers' associations which are very active and do not hesitate to sue for damages, or misleading advertising campaigns or for uncompetitive practices. Even though they are not fooled by their individual capacity to transform the system as a whole, consumers themselves engage in huge boycotts concerning products or brands (Klein, 2000). The idea that we live in a Risk Society that docile consumers have contributed to create, also urges parents to change their individual behaviours. An alternative press is now emerging whose announced objective is to educate consumers and help them defeat socially unacceptable marketing practices. A French survey institute⁴ announced in July 2004 that 25 % of French consumers behave as "alter-consumers" who reject brands, use Internet intensively to get information about the products and the manufacturers, and explore alternative distribution channels... Brand disaffection and betrayal appear as a major threat for institutionalized marketing and distribution arenas and can be interpreted as weak signals that announce a massive change in the values associated with consumerism in general (Marion, 2004).

In that perspective, the field of children's consumerism is quite interesting as the tensions it undergoes can be considered as signs that herald a forthcoming major change in consumption practices. Slowly, parents are learning to reconsider their consumption habits in order to search for meaning and long term social value in the selected products. Inventing a meaningful consumption will henceforth be the major challenge both for parents and industrialists aiming at children. This will lead to a dialectical confrontation of values as for instance:

Hedonist and pleasure ← vs → Educational added value
 Individual benefits ← vs → Contribution to collective progress
 Socially unacceptable ← vs → Socially responsible
 Short term benefits ← vs → Long term systemic effects
 Short term employment ← vs → Public future spending

This perspective highlights the fact that the relationship between the child and the market is always mediated by different institutions, resulting in a complex intertwining of logics, interests and values... Children-oriented commercial activities appear to constitute a highly ambiguous and controversial field upon which several institutions fiercely confront their ideological standpoints. On such a sensitive topic, forms of resistance to the ideology associated to mass consumption emerge with unusual intensity, thus ending in an attempt to reshaping the field and defining new criteria to assess the social added value brought in by firms.

⁴ La distribution est désespérée face aux « alterconsommateurs », *Le Monde*, 15 juillet 2004

2.2.2 – The stake of responsibility: creating long term social value

The problem raised by the Globesity epidemic is a very clear illustration of the complexity of managerial action when aimed at children. The uncontrollable evolution of the epidemic is quite frightening – USA, Canada, Great Britain... and now France and other European countries, etc.- as it seriously endangers the global welfare system in all those countries. Not because of the series of illnesses provoked by obesity, but much more because of the necessity to fund huge investments in order to re-equip hospitals and clinics with suitably adapted furniture and therapeutic devices able to resist an average patient's weight increasing by 50 %!

Of course, in all these cases, it is a quite dense group of causes that combine and contribute to create... several years after... an uncontrollable and unmanageable situation. Managerial action – including marketing campaigns, etc. - is not the main cause... as there are demographical, sociological, cultural and political trends that favour the emergence of such phenomena. But, it is quite obvious that managers cannot avoid reflecting on their own responsibility in the long term and systemic consequences of managerial action aimed at children. Managerial practice is now pushed to take a more reflexive turn and to clearly state the way it conceives its long term contribution to society. Firms willing to last in children-oriented markets will need to make explicit their contribution in order to achieve more responsible marketing practices and to re-assess the actual meaning of mass-consumption.

→ *Achieving consistency in organizing industrial activities:* Toy manufacturers, industrials in the clothing trade, are in the front line when criticisms arise about the relocation of their industrial activities in search of a cheap labour force. Throwing out an active participation to labels such as “Child Free” or l’“Ethique dans l’étiquette”, or even organizing a surprise visit of their Asian subcontractors is not sufficient. SMOBY, the French leader in toy manufacturing has decided to solve that problem by directly buying subsidiaries in Thailand and China. The company has hired 12 engineers who directly control the entire manufacturing process. As SMOBY runs its own factories, it can guarantee that no child is working to produce their products. But the cost of this strategic choice is about 4 % of the annual turnover, which is only partly compensated by the productivity and the low wages in that area.

→ *Legitimizing the educational added value brought by its products or services:* Educators and educational research have been part of LeapFrog's core assets since its foundation. As noted in the 2002 annual report, “*We believe that sound educational principles, are at the core of the value of our brands or products*”. Its Educational Advisory Board, initiated in 2000, formally engaged the talents of leading educators toward the creation of mass-market learning products designed in accordance with established standards for age-appropriate learning. In addition to benefit from these nationally recognized experts, the firm benefited from the expertise of the many former teachers who had come to work at the company. In 2003, about one third of the total staff had been employed in the education sector at some point of their careers. 4 educational principles:

- Children learn best when actively engaged
- Positive reinforcement and immediate feedback
- Ability-appropriate tasks motivate learners
- Supplemental materials should complement and enhance what children learn at school.

(Applegate and Dede, 2003)

The same kind of strategy is implemented by Bayard Presse, a leading French press group in the constitution of the editorial board of magazines aimed at children from 3 to 18 years old.

This concern should lead industrials to accept having their products more systematically tested among parents and children by social scientists like psychologists or sociologists... Industrials will have to take part into some controversies about the most suitable educational principles to be applied to educative activities...

→ *Choosing responsible marketing and promotional techniques*: The European Commission agreed until recently that children constitute the most obvious group of “vulnerable consumers” and, were therefore, entitled to particular protection. The “Television Without Frontiers Directive”⁵ that regulates television broadcasting and advertising, dedicates several articles on advertisements in relation to children, as well as specific provisions about the programmes children are likely to watch. The protection of children and other “vulnerable consumers” stands high on regulators’ agendas. The ECJ stated repeatedly⁶ that advertising ensures market access for products and increases consumers’ choice. The Court formulated the concept of “*a reasonably circumspect consumer*”, able to adopt a critical attitude towards all sorts of promotions and offers. The aim is to ban commercial practices that are likely to materially distort the economic behaviour of a group of consumers that are particularly vulnerable to a product or practice because of their “*mental or physical infirmity, age or credulity*”.

→ *Committing far beyond self-regulating practices*: The European Software Association decided in 2001 to launch a programme aimed at improving the information given about video games’ content through the packaging... This good initiative has to be related to the actual practices held by children when they buy video games. And what appears? Children buy games that do not suit their age: their video game library massively includes titles that are recommended for older children. This professional initiative was aimed at reassuring parents and preventing possible complaints... but can it be considered as a truly responsible attitude as it turns out to be largely ineffective?

The alternative solution of Self-Regulatory Codes that replace laws in some countries, and complement laws elsewhere will also be envisaged. Self-regulation is primarily a tool for advertisers, their agencies and the media to control the content of advertising, which appears in business or consumer media. It is a system which enables advertisers to develop codes of practice, in accordance with which they are prepared to act and by which they are prepared to be judged. The aim of self-regulation is to modify or moderate the content of advertising so that it first of all complies with the relevant European or national legislation and secondly, with the prevailing national codes. Ideally, this activity should occur before the advertising appears. While this often happens, it is also certainly true that, in practice, there are times when advertising which contravenes either legal boundaries or self-imposed rules, appears on TV, or in other media.

→ *Supporting educational initiatives about consumption*: The current pressure on the food sector to respond to the political and media outcry on obesity is making food manufacturers look closely at their product ranges and at their marketing strategies. For example, a recent

⁵ Directive 97/36/EC of 30 June 1997 amending Directive 89/552/EEC on the Coordination of certain Provisions laid down by Law, Regulation or Administrative Action in member States Concerning the Pursuit of Television Broadcasting Activities, OJ L202/60 of 30 July 1997

⁶ Case C-412/93, *Société d'Importation Edouard Leclerc-Siplec v TF1 Publicité and M6 Publicité*, [1995], ECR I-0179 ; Joined Cases C-34/95, 35/95 and 36/95, *Konsumentenombudsmannen v De Agostini (Svenska) Förlga AB and TV Shop i Sverige AB*, [1997], ECR I-3843 ; Case C-405/98, *Konsumentenombudsmannen v Gourmet International Products Aktiebolag*, [2001], ECR I-1795

publication by Unilever, owner of some of the world's best known brands, says: *"Our vitality mission will focus our brands on meeting consumer needs arising from the biggest issues around the world today - ageing populations, urbanisation, changing diets and lifestyles."*⁷

In France, a new code on advertising to children developed by the industry is being amended by Government after a debated in the Senate. Over and above the new industry code, the French Government has proposed that TV advertising messages for food products manufactured with the addition of sugar, fat, salt or synthetic sweeteners, broadcast from and received on French territory, must carry a specific health information message. Advertisers may derogate from this obligation provided they make a financial contribution to the National Institute for Prevention and Health Education. This contribution would be used to finance the production, by the Government, of nutritional information and education campaigns. All advertisers of food products whose nutritional composition may be harmful to children's or adolescents' health if consumed excessively, will have the obligation of financing the production and broadcasting of a health information message on nutrition, to be aired within the same viewing time as the food advertisements.

Several other recent proposals were published by the Commission such as a Recommendation on the Protection of Minors⁸ that suggest practical solutions such as media literacy programmes for minors and adults for example, as a protection against potentially harmful programmes or websites. Companies operating on child-oriented markets would be inspired to proactively participate to such educational campaigns rather than waiting until enforcement measures are taken by governments.

Conclusion: Towards a transformational agenda for marketing management and research

Although, children-oriented markets are constructed by some consultancy firms as a kind of "Eldorado", our tentative reflections go clearly against such an interpretation and call for caution in managerial decision-making and practice when aimed at children.

From an academic standpoint, this analysis opens the way to a deep reappraisal both of marketing managers' responsibility in contemporary society and of the long term contribution of marketing itself as a social institution.

As consumers, citizens and researchers, we are still facing the deleterious effects of "The great transformation" (Polanyi, 1944) which has lead the economic realm to slowly drift away from political and social realms and to self-legitimize in a solipsist manner. As managers but also as researchers and citizens, can we accept that the economic circles develop on their own, regardless of social, political and ecological concerns? As researchers, we can't escape the responsibility which is incumbent upon us to re-define the conditions under which we can develop more socially responsible research projects. This implies two major shifts : fostering an inter-disciplinary dialogue in research processes (Robertson and Feldman, 1976) and

⁷ Dominic LYLE, Director General, EACA - Wednesday July 14th 2004 – UK Parliament

⁸ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of minors and human dignity and the right of reply in relation to the competitiveness of the European audiovisual and information service industry, COM(2004) 341 final, of 30.04.2004

accepting to engage in the demanding discussion about the ethical preconceptions our theoretical frameworks are based on.

It seems urgent to design a transformative agenda in marketing research in order to avoid reducing the child to a mere “*ego consumans*” (Baudrillard 1970 : 121) and to promote socially responsible research practices and ethically embedded theoretical frameworks likely to contribute to a meaningful renovation of the finality of marketing discipline as a whole (Bergadaa, 2004).

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