

# Globalization and the Commercialization of Childhood

*Allen D. Kanner*

The Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA) is a relatively new American company that offers the services of its 40,000 “agents”—girls aged six to eighteen—to corporate customers that want to create a buzz for their products. GIA recruits these girls from around the country by inviting them to become an “official GIA agent” of a “very elite group.” The girls are given exclusive offers for products, events, and free online fashion consultation with Agent Kiki, a supposed “big sis” who in fact is the GIA staff providing answers to the girls’ email questions. The hallmark of GIA is its “Slumber Party in a Box,” in which a GIA girl invites up to eleven friends for an overnight party at which she passes out free products—toys, cosmetics, films, and the like—while taking notes for GIA on her friends’ reactions. She does not tell them that the event is sponsored. In fact, GIA instructs the girls to “be slick and find out some sly scoop on your friends,” such as what they think is currently fashionable.

There’s so much wrong with this picture that it’s hard to know where to start: large corporations teaching girls to manipulate their friends for profit, parents going along with it, the girls being used as consultants for a pittance (they get to keep product samples but don’t get paid), GIA lying to its young agents about Agent Kiki, the company recruiting girls by playing to their need to be recognized as special when in fact the girls are being used and deceived.

Yet GIA is in certain respects only a symptom, a recent entry into the race to the ethical bottom that is modern marketing to children. The deluge of advertising aimed at young people over the last twenty years has caused children and teenagers to become cynical about marketing, forcing marketers to constantly come up with new manipulations and deceptions to reach their audience. The marketers call this cynicism a form of “sophistication” as opposed to what it really is: children shutting down emotionally to protect themselves from the commercial world. But with the clever assistance of companies like GIA, the industry is staying one step ahead of the game, and each

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year children are spending more than they ever have before.

## *Going Global*

With the rise of economic globalization, the commercialization of childhood has become a worldwide phenomenon. The institutions and treaties that drive globalization—such as the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and NAFTA—all require participating nations to open their borders to multinational corporations and to put these powerful entities on equal footing with their domestic industries. The result is that these huge companies bring their sophisticated marketing campaigns, including those aimed at children, to every corner of the earth.

For example, from 1992–2001, India had one children’s TV channel, the Cartoon Channel, owned by Turner International. Since last year at least eight more have been or will shortly be launched, most of them owned by multinational corporations such as Nickelodeon, Disney, Sony, and Turner. As of mid-2004, India had 337 million youngsters fourteen or under, even more than China’s 289 million, representing a huge untapped market.

A recent report by the British-based marketing company Euromonitor, entitled “Marketing to Teenagers,” gives a sense of the growing global market. The document is extremely detailed, breaking down teenage spending by geographical region, major countries, types of products, and a host of other variables. From it we learn that in 2002 teenage expenditures, and parents’ expenditures on teenagers, together amounted to over 220 billion dollars worldwide. Not surprisingly, the United States accounted for the largest market share (39 percent), followed by Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, although Norway, Sweden, and Denmark had the highest spending per teenager. The most popular products were computer games/consoles, mobile phones, “grazing” items (i.e. junk food, tobacco products, and alcohol), clothing/footwear, and musical recordings.

The report describes a world on the brink of the worst global economy in thirty years, yet anticipates a robust adolescent market, predicting that “‘pester power’ and peer pressure are likely to remain a strong counterbalance to any threat to teenage expenditure levels.” The report also forecasts that

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the developed countries will continue to dominate the market in the near future, but adds that “nevertheless, the sheer numbers of teenagers in developing markets such as China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil means that only a slight increase in teenage spending can create huge overall growth in global teenage markets.”

As multi-national corporations are well aware, there are at least three major reasons for advertising to children that go well beyond how much children are currently spending and that justify aggressively expanding the global market. The first is the creation of “brand loyalty.” If you advertise to children early, you can significantly increase the chance that they’ll stay with your product as the years progress. The second is that children become attached to adult products long before they buy them—an insight that has led to the singing frogs in beer commercials and talking cars in gasoline ads. Finally, children are increasingly participating in their parents’ purchasing decisions, which is why the automobile industry and even the real estate industry are now wooing young customers.

### *Corporate Materialism*

Why is all this advertising a problem? There are several reasons. One is that the vast majority of products marketed to children and adolescents are harmful to them. These include junk food, violent toys and media, alcohol, tobacco, and sexy clothing for pre-teens. Apparently it is relatively easy to sell products that appeal to children’s impulsive, rebellious, and hedonistic sides, so marketers take the path of least resistance. In doing so, they reinforce these qualities in young people, while neglecting and often denigrating the more gentle, thoughtful, and compassionate dimensions of childhood.

Beyond selling harmful products, however, modern advertising conveys an overarching materialistic message that penetrates deep into children’s psyches, molding their values and understanding of the world. This message is subtle, as each ad is a variation of the basic theme that happiness comes from purchasing the right product. This theme is repeated 40,000 times a year to American children on television alone.

A growing body of evidence, however, has documented the harm that arises from adopting materialistic values. Throughout the course of history spiritual traditions have taught that materialistic values are antithetical to compassion, generosity, and kindness, and recent psychological research supports the wisdom of these insights. Studies have shown, for example, that materialism is associated with selfishness and a lack of social concern. Further, this research indicates that materialistic individuals are less happy than others, more anxious and depressed, and less skilled in interpersonal relationships.

However, modern marketing does not simply promote a generic form of materialism. Rather, it conveys a narrow and highly specific consumer message, one that claims that happiness is attained through purchasing the products and services of multi-national corporations. I call this “corporate materialism.”

Thus, these days children do not yearn for just any old shoes, hamburgers, sodas, dolls, cell phones, and computers, as generic materialism would have it, but for the offerings of Nike, McDonald’s, Coke, Mattel, Cingular, and Apple. Branding is paramount, and the company that makes what you own is as important as what you own. It is corporate stuff that is the stuff of dreams.

The corporate dream, in turn, is one of a world in which the same stores, the same restaurants, the same movies, the same fashions—that is, the same products and services—can be bought anywhere, any time. Jerry Mander and his colleagues at the International Forum on Globalization have described this ideal as one of a worldwide corporate monoculture. In this monoculture, differences among nations and cultures are homogenized to such an extent that people’s desires and tastes are fully in concert with the output of multi-national corporations. This is the vision underlying economic globalization.

Children absorb the vision of globalization, of a worldwide corporate monoculture that provides all that people could ever need and desire, when they are repeatedly exposed to corporate marketing. In the process, they come to identify with brands, logos, and ultimately with corporations themselves, and come to see the existence of corporations as essential to their happiness. As children mature, their early bonding with brands undermines their ability to critically evaluate the corporate structure and to decide if it is truly delivering on its utopian promises.

Many marketers believe that telecommunications technology holds the key to the creation of an interconnected consumer planet. In this respect, it is worth noting that computers and cell phones are the top two revenue-generating products worldwide for teens and pre-teens. Martin Lindstrom, an expert in marketing to pre-teens, or what the industry calls “tweens” (roughly ages eight through fourteen), spells out how the virtual monoculture is taking form in his book *Brandchild: Remarkable Insights into the Minds of Today’s Global Kids and Their Relationships with Brands*. Lindstrom describes the growing popularity of interactive role-playing games that are “located” in virtual fantasylands.

These games are accessible twenty-four hours a day and capable of including thousands of participants simultaneously. Sony’s EverQuest, which features the virtual world of Narrath, is a prime example, boasting over half a million subscribers to date and 60,000 players logged on at any given time. The average Narrath citizen spends thirty-six hours a week in this virtual world, while some 93,000 players spend more time there than at their jobs. The game is so addictive that it is reportedly responsible for several thousand divorces.

According to Lindstrom’s survey, young people are already heavily involved in virtual role-playing games. Over a third of urban pre-teens have at least two “avatars,” or characters they have developed for interactive games, which are often the product of an enormous investment of time. Twenty percent

of urban pre-teens say they prefer the virtual to the real world.

For Lindstrom, all of this comes together through a relatively new development, the use of real money to purchase goods and services sold in the fantasylands of cyberspace. He anticipates, for instance, that in the near future children will be able to purchase at the virtual hat store the same hat for themselves and their avatar. Or they could get a full-time job through their avatar as, say, a clerk at a virtual Wal-Mart. In this way global on-line “communities”—created by multi-national corporations and structured around their wares—will develop in which children can participate from an early age.

### *Think Globally, Advertise Locally*

Even if we remain within the confines of the real world, the general consensus among major corporations that sell to children is that it is necessary to market internationally in order to survive. Starting this year, for example, Coca-Cola is substantially increasing its global marketing expenditures, concentrating on high growth markets such as Brazil, China, India and Russia. Last year, as part of its global marketing campaign “i’m lovin’ it,” McDonald’s announced its partnership with the rhythm and blues group Destiny’s Child, whose new tour, “Destiny Fulfilled and lovin’ it,” will stop in the U.K., France, Germany, Spain, Japan, Australia, and Brazil this spring and the U.S. and Canada in 2006.

McDonald’s “i’m lovin’ it” campaign uses two contrasting marketing strategies, both of which are highly effective at promoting a global monoculture. The first strategy, as illustrated by the partnership with Destiny’s Child, involves developing the cross-cultural appeal of a company’s product. Thus Dan Barrett, Senior Vice President of McDonald’s Global Marketing, promises that the company “will continue to develop innovative, breakthrough programs in the areas of music, fashion, entertainment and sports. These universal themes connect with people everywhere....”

Finding ways to appeal to people everywhere is certainly consistent with creating a globalized consumer monoculture. But marketers tout the second major international marketing technique, called “localization,” as being culturally sensitive and as encouraging diversity. Localization occurs when a multi-national corporation infuses local culture into its products, services, and marketing. For example, for its new children’s TV channels in India, Disney is producing shows using local television crews, writers, and actors. In the same vein,

McDonald’s has modified its menu to meet the cultural preferences of different countries, serving cheeseless Big Macs in Israel (to keep milk and meat separate) and chilled yogurt drinks (*ayram*) in Turkey, while decorating some of its Chinese outlets with paper cuts of auspicious traditional symbols, such as magpies and twin fishes. Kentucky Fried Chicken, which has over 1,000 outlets in China and is adding 200 annually, is serving preserved Sichuan pickle and shredded pork soups. These companies also produce commercials starring local musicians, actors, and other celebrities.

In short, localization is a euphemism for the commodification of culture. International marketing campaigns that employ this technique are simply using cultural trappings as a lure, much like draping a beautiful woman over a car in an automobile ad. A cheeseless Big Mac, after all, is still fatty processed food sold by a huge corporation, and thus still part

of the monoculture. The association of traditional Chinese symbols with fast food is a distortion and cheapening of these emblems. A popular local musician who sings in a McDonald’s commercial sends a message to children that it is acceptable to compromise artistic talent—to sell out—for corporate money.

Hiring local employees and businesses is not a problem per se, but the friendly young Chinese woman serving Kentucky Fried Chicken in Peking is severely limited by corporate protocols in what she can say and do. The local New Delhi TV crew hired by Turner International is yoked to a global trade bureaucracy that, through treaties and loan agree-

ments, dictates India’s investment rules, overpowers India’s truly local businesses, and funnels profits out of the country. In all of these instances, local culture has been subsumed by corporate culture, and the homogenization process continues.

The challenge we face, then, is this: as global marketing to children expands, so too does its overarching but subtle message supporting globalization. What is to be done? It is time for the anti-globalization movement to promote a worldwide ban on marketing to children. This ban would protect children from the commercialization of childhood, which not only commodifies the process of growing up but also emotionally bonds children to the corporate monoculture.

Our children deserve a commercial-free childhood, one in which they are free to play, free to determine for themselves what is cool, and free to work things out with their parents and society—without being hounded every step of the way by mighty corporations. □

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