BOOK REVIEWS


‘When it comes to research regarding children, media and consumption,’ writes one of the editors of this volume, ‘it is important to look at this area through interdisciplinary glasses’ (p. 94). This position is well reflected in the range of essays that make up Children, Media and Consumption: On the Front Edge. The book offers a broad spectrum of insights and ideas about how contemporary children and youth use, interact with, interpret and make sense of their world in and through the commercially dominated landscapes of 21st century media. It grew out of an international multidisciplinary conference on child and teen consumption held in Copenhagen in 2006, and is part of the excellent series of research monographs published on a regular basis by the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media – an organisation based at Göteborg University and financed by the Swedish government and UNESCO.

Children, Media and Consumption sets out to shed new light on this subject by presenting research and recent studies conducted by scholars working in different countries and drawing on different disciplinary traditions – including education, childhood studies, media studies, consumer studies, and gender studies. One thing which is clearly shared by the writers of the 20 essays which make up the collection is the conviction that the insights gained through research into how children appropriate, use and perceive new media have the potential of equipping educators and parents with better ways of helping young people become more responsible and autonomous in their use of commercially-dominated media technologies and messages.

The book is divided into three broad sections focusing on Media Culture, Brand and Advertising Cultures, and Family Culture – though the editors insist that there is a fair deal of overlap between the different sections. The eight essays in the first section focus primarily on different aspects of children as consumers of computing and internet technology, as well as on their relationships with mobile phones and new media more generally. There is a good range of topics covered here, with interesting reports on recent research conducted with different age and gender groups and in different geographical locations. The topics covered include the marketing of educational software and computer games, patterns of internet and computer use among ‘tweens’ and teens, and children’s motives for acquiring mobile phones and how they use them once they have them. Other essays in this
section look at questions of online privacy, differences in how young people use the internet at home and at school, and ways in which digital and other media are perceived and used by children and teenagers in a range of countries.

The eight essays in the second section deal with different aspects of market branding and advertising aimed at children, with particular emphasis on the nutritional implications of how food and drink are sold to children. A recurring concern here is children’s potential vulnerability to sophisticated market strategies – particularly in view of the fact that today’s young people are the most intensely analysed demographic group in the history of marketing and market research. Individual essays thus focus on how different children and age groups understand and respond to television advertising targeted at the young; on the issues raised by ‘fun food’ which links food with play (as in chocolate eggs containing miniature toys); and on the links between advertising and the growing health problems caused by excessive weight and poor nutrition among children worldwide.

The final section of the book focuses on ‘family culture’, with particular emphasis on how family life has been modified by the patterns and imperatives of consumer culture. One essay looks at how the possession of consumer toys has come to be seen as a precondition of a happy childhood and of an ‘accomplished’ family life. Another examines how consumerism influences the ways in which children’s rooms are decorated with visual artefacts, and how choices in this regard are negotiated between children and their parents. The last two essays in the volume discuss young people’s changing attitudes to environmental consumerism, and how parents and children have become active participants in the propagation of consumerism by habitually parading on the ‘catwalk of consumption’.

The volume’s opening essay, by David Buckingham, provides a useful illustration of the types of practical and pedagogical concerns which underlie the book as a whole. Buckingham here considers the motives, uses and commercial strategies which inform the current growth of the ‘edutainment’ industry in computing software, CD-ROMs, games and websites which are designed and sold as combining learning with entertainment. This software is primarily targeted at parents who are willing to pay for educational goods and services in the hope of engaging their children in ‘informal learning’ at home – as a way of supplementing schoolwork and also perhaps to salve their own consciences for not being able to devote more of their own increasingly limited time to helping more directly in their children’s education. Buckingham’s study suggests that while anxious parents may represent a ‘soft touch’ for marketers of this educational software, children themselves do not appear to be so easily persuaded, so that even when their parents buy it for them, children actually make very limited use of such software. This lack of interest is partly ascribed to children’s unwillingness to
spend their free time in anything that closely resembles schoolwork, and also to the fact that the limited quality of much of the educational software currently available makes it much less appealing to children than all the other (commercially generated) things they can do with computers anyway. Among the issues raised here is the fact that commercially-oriented software aimed at children has become so heavily dominated by attention-grabbing entertainment that ‘edutainment’ faces a losing battle. As a result, Buckingham suggests, ‘the idea – promoted by some enthusiasts for educational computing – that new technology will automatically result in new, more liberating styles of “informal learning” in the home seems somewhat questionable’ (p. 44).

The main strength of the volume as a whole is in the variety of perspectives and insights which it brings to this important topic, together with the wealth of relevant research which is analysed and discussed here. One unfortunate limitation is the distracting presence of a number of typographical errors in the editorial introduction. Another is the fact that, perhaps inevitably, the different contributions are not of an even quality. But the scholarship displayed in most of the essays is impressive, making Children, Media and Consumption a valuable and timely addition to the growing research literature on children’s and young people’s changing relations with media and consumer culture. The issues raised by the book as a whole are also of urgent topicality for parents and educators concerned with helping their children navigate their way through the increasing complexities of a media-saturated and consumption-driven world.

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