

Customer Voice Research

Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood Executive Summary

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The research

In its work to assess evidence and recommend how to address public concerns around the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood, the Bailey Review highlighted gaps in the evidence around views of parents and young people. In particular, little existing intelligence was available as to *how much parents know about their children's experience of marketing and consumption and parents views of peer influence and pressure on children*. Qualitative research was therefore commissioned to help address these gaps and strengthen the evidence base.

Research Objective

The key research objective was: *to understand what parents experience in relation to commercialisation (and sexualisation) of childhood and what would help them manage or improve their experience*. The research explored knowledge, experiences of and attitudes towards pressures to consume childhood products and services, as well as current advertising and marketing approaches towards these products and services, and views on responsibility and support for the above.

Sample

The research sample included 30 research sessions of 1.5 hours each:

- 10 group discussions with parents (4 respondents)
- 10 individual interviews with parents
- 10 paired depths with couples/co-parents

Within this, there was comprehensive representation of Mums and Dads, five priority Department for Education audience segments¹, spread of size of family, gender and age of children, spread of SEG and spread of household income from <£15k to >£41k. The sample also included a spread of BME respondents from different ethnic groups.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork took place between 15th February and 3rd March 2011 in Leeds, Stockport, Nottingham, Birmingham, Bristol, Redditch and London (Hammersmith, Camberwell, Worcester Park and Barnet).

¹ A2 Committed but discontented, A3 Struggling through, A4 Supporting but frustrated, A6 Stepping back, A8 Family focused. <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFE-00008-2011>

Key Findings

Overall, spontaneous concern about the impact of commercialisation in the area of childhood was relatively low:

- *Pressure to consume* is acknowledged as an *irritation* but is rationalised as acceptable - the sense of real personal harm is very low and irritation is traded off against the perceived benefits.
- *Potential for real harm* to self or children from aspects of commercialisation is not top of mind but can arise when parents become focused on some areas of commercial activity.

The irritations perceived to arise from pressure to consume include (in order of perceived personal impact):

- The personal *emotional burden of dealing with incessant nagging and high expectations from children* about acquisition of fashion and other material goods;
- *Reduced disposable income*;
- *Wastage/excessive consumption* (as a financial rather than green issue);
- *Family antagonism* and arguments arising from needing to manage nagging and expectations mentioned above;
- Children becoming 'spoiled' and *developing inappropriate values* and expectations from life.

Irritation is downplayed, or concern about the irritation reduced, as a result of:

- *Parents' recognition of the benefits and gains that can come* from advertising and marketing, products, services and media aimed at children and young people, including:
 - *Contribution or access to social credibility*: In the belief that *acquisition of material goods indicates success (particularly those which are fashionable or high value)*, there is increased potential for peer popularity, higher confidence of child and status of child and family. This is particularly important where bullying is seen as a consequence of not having access to these things;
 - *Educational value*: Parents believe that advertising and marketing helps educate themselves and their children on what is up to date – particularly in terms of fashion and technology. Being up to date or ahead in these areas is believed to make individuals 'competitive' and compelling within the social and employment world;
 - *Facilitates genuine advantage*: Parents recognise that advertising and marketing allows them to see and take advantage of 'deals' and bargains that they might otherwise miss.
 - *Rewards culture*: Parents feel that treating themselves and their family, or rewarding good behaviour, through purchased items is established and legitimate practice;
 - *Facilitates personal parenting style*: Some parents acknowledge that they use purchasing for their children as part of their own specific parental style (e.g. to differentiate themselves from 'strict', 'old-fashioned' or 'out of touch' parents).
- *Parents' acknowledge their own contribution* to the pressure to consume through their own active pursuit of the benefits outlined above.
- A sense that *commercialisation simply reflects the world today* and in the context of such mass movement it is not possible to experience anything different without being unusual (or possibly deprived).
- A belief that there are ways and means that children can access products, services and material through other channels and in other environments that are not under the control of parents, so effort and impact in some areas is limited and should therefore just be accepted.
- There is an *assumption that safety controls are in place to deal with real risk of harm* (although doubts can arise in relation to some product areas and advertising).

- Parents believe that they have not directly experienced real harm as a result of pressure to consume and have relatively high hopes that harm issues won't affect 'my children' (at all or in the longer term).

In light of the above, overall, parents believed they are broadly responsible for the impacts arising from *pressure to consume*. Although sense of control varies between individuals and is not always what they want it to be, there is general resistance to external or Government intervention to reduce pressure, in case this also restricts access to the above benefits and choice.

However, in terms of advertising and marketing, there was a general consensus and concern that the volume of advertising aimed at children was very high and this can impact on pressure to consume. Many parents were also unaware of some newer marketing techniques such as buzz marketing, online tracking to target online advertising and peer to peer marketing. While it was expected that the former two would be well-regulated, there was more concern and doubt about *peer marketing*. Specifically:

- Parents were uncomfortable with the notion of children being paid to promote goods to others (which they felt was insidious or duplicitous);
- There was a recognition that regulation of delivery was not possible by any authority since this would vary by individual and would be delivered in an environment that was not monitored;
- Assuming peer marketing was delivered out of the home environment and away from parents, they felt they also did not have the option to monitor or control exposure or 'take out' from the activity by their children themselves.

External factors like advertising and marketing, celebrity culture and perceived norms are perceived as sources of pressure to consume in their own right, and to influence and exacerbate each other. However, they are also felt to feed into **peer pressure** amongst both children and adults, which parents find very difficult to manage. As such, activity which could help them manage peer pressure more, by addressing the external factors or opportunities for influence in some way, may be welcomed.

On deeper consideration of some examples of commercial activity and on potential areas of harm, some fears and concerns also arise as to how commercial activity may be inadvertently supporting or fuelling specific health or development issues, for example:

Issue of Concern	Examples of commercial activity considered to support or fuel these issues
<p>Body image and confidence, which are felt to potentially lead to mental or physical health issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising and broadcast/published media content featuring models and celebrities who are 'unhealthily thin' and 'too perfect' – in both child-focused and adult-focused material that children may see.
<p>Early sexualisation, with concerns and fears around both early sexual activity and risk of teenage pregnancy as well as risk of being targeted by adults for sexual purposes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising, broadcast/published media and music content – that is directed at children or targeted at adults but seen by children - featuring models, celebrities and characters who are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inappropriately sexually suggestive - illustrating the value or role of women as sexual only (a criticism of music in particular) - models, or child models presented as older than their age group - glamorising or normalising 'deviant' behaviour

	<p>(various)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Products, clothes and toys/giveaways which encourage children to think of themselves (and others to think of children) as adult or sexual (e.g. bras, revealing clothes, word 'sexy' on children's clothes, make up)
<p>Encouragement of alcohol consumption, a concern mostly due to perceived links to other risk behaviours (drugs, ASB, sex, etc) and possible health risks of becoming a heavy drinker.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult-targeted alcohol advertising that is seen by children pre-watershed • Adult-targeted alcohol advertising that is felt to really be targeting teenagers by using very young adults and glamorising alcohol as a mark of identity or a component for social success.
<p>Encouragement of violent behaviour, <i>'deviant' behaviour (e.g. prostitution) and aggressive interaction.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic games that are labelled as 18+ but have insufficient description as to the full nature of the content and 'openly' marketed at a younger audience on pre-watershed television • Music and films where such behaviours are normalised or glamorised.

Many parents acknowledged examples of where they could see behaviours that *may* be a result of the negative impacts of the above on their children (directly, or through creating new norms amongst young people), for example:

- Self-consciousness about body weight and shape amongst girls (from 7+)
- Threatening behaviour and language from boys
- Inappropriate suggestiveness/sexualised display from teenage girls (e.g. through Facebook pictures)

At present, although parents claim to take some steps to mitigate or reduce harm (for example, though explaining material to their children or limiting access, where possible, to films or games deemed inappropriate), they believe they have less control over these negative influences, especially those that are 'omnipresent'.

Conclusions

In light of this, Government (or its agencies) are felt to have an important regulatory and policing role to prevent harm, through generating and enforcing guidelines on content, time and place of access.

Retailers, manufacturers and other commercial entities are not trusted by parents to be able to define and enforce limits themselves. Although parents feel they may be able to sign up to good practice, they believe that competition and market forces may lead these organisations to understandably (but not acceptably) deviate from what is appropriate.

Although there was little overt desire to take an active role in helping to monitor commercial activity themselves, parents felt that they may use an easy complaining or 'logging' solution, particularly if it was seen as something that was well used by others. While few wish to take a lead, they are happy to support activity that is understood to have benefits and be a norm amongst parents.