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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Young Consumers: Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Lundby, E. (2011)

Consumer research on tweens: putting the pieces together.

Young Consumers: Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers, 12(4): 326-336

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17473611111185878>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-15896>

Abstract

Purpose

The aim with this article is to critically review Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers from the years 1990 – 2007.

Methodology

In total, 35 studies were examined. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective was used to depict what parts of children's lives had been investigated. The theory highlights different contexts and analytical levels in children's environments that may influence their consumer behavior.

Findings

Scandinavian research has mainly focused on the individual child as a consumer and on interpersonal relations. The societal transformations that gradually changes the Scandinavian countries seem to have been less investigated. In addition, there is a lack of Scandinavian consumer research on interaction between different contexts, such as parents and school, which may influence children's consumer behavior.

Research limitations/Implications

This article has not critically reviewed each specific investigation in the field, but focused on the spread of aggregated Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers.

Practical implications

A more composite picture of consumption patterns among Scandinavian tweens is provided, which may be used as a guideline for educators, marketers and other professionals that interact with this age group.

Originality/value

Few attempts have been made to obtain a composite picture of Scandinavian consumer research on tweens. This question is of particular importance in times when the discourse of children's role in consumer society is changing, in order to understand the implications for future theoretical and empirical development in this dynamic field.

Keywords

Children, consumption, Scandinavia, tweens

Paper type

Literature review

Introduction

Täby Municipality organizes the summer camp "Girl & The City" for 11- to 12-year old children. Forget the classic holiday camp with games and beaches. Instead, in Täby the girls are offered one week of "city-life" with "latte everyday".

(Aftonbladet, 2009)

In this article the question of what is covered and not covered in the research of children as consumers will be addressed, with focus on the Scandinavian setting. This question is of particularly importance in times of changing discourses surrounding children's role in the consumer society. In 2009, a Swedish newspaper wrote about a summer camp focused on consumption for young girls in a wealthy district of Stockholm. Some readers became upset and said that "children should be children and nothing else". However, several readers meant that this is something that the girls want, other camps are seen as uninteresting, moral panic is the word". As these statements exemplify, the ways Scandinavian children are portrayed as consumers have gradually changed, from vulnerable beings towards competent actors in their own lives (Tufté, 2010). This impacts on debates about regulation and deregulation on consumption and media directed to children (Skirstad, 2006; Plogell & Sundström, 2004). Such discussions have to a high degree focused on 'tweens', a category crafted in the 1980s by North American marketers (Cook & Kaiser, 2004), often referring to children between 7-12 years old. The characteristic connected to the transformation during the tween period, from being a small child to becoming almost a teenager with more economic resources, more pressure to consume and more power over their own consumption, makes tweens an attractive group on the market and an important focus for research (Johansson, 2005; Lundby 2008). The relationship between consumption and tweens has been studied extensively during the

past decade. In the Scandinavian countries alone, over 30 studies from various disciplines have been published since the year 2000 (Lundby, 2008). The aim of this article is to critically review, not specific investigations in the field, but the spread of the aggregated Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers, from the years 1990 – 2007. More specifically, one central question is investigated. *What analytical levels has been the focus in the aggregated research?* In other words, *is the research mainly occupied by the individual child or by the societal structure that surround children's lives?* By answering these important questions, we can gain implications for future theoretical and empirical development in the dynamic research field of tweens as consumers.

The child consumer in the Scandinavian setting

The Scandinavian countries share, to a high degree, common characteristics as welfare state regimes: in many reviews, Sweden, Denmark and Norway are often grouped together because of their strong social-democratic labor movements, their pronounced redistributive welfare systems and their similarities when it comes to political and economic traditions (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990). Today, two overall changing processes in the Scandinavian countries are noticeable (Bonke, 2005). Firstly, a withdrawal of the states responsibility: the market has taken over the distribution of a number of services. Secondly, the public area of responsibility has been influenced by principles of the market and more responsibility has been placed on the individual. Consequently, the Scandinavian countries have become more liberalized, with higher economic differences between households as a result. This, in combination with the increasing impact of consumption in children's lives, and the shift in how to portray children as consumers makes knowledge of young consumers highly important. Children have, to a high degree, been strongly protected by the welfare systems in Scandinavia. Consequently, Scandinavian research on consumption and economics has mainly been addressed from

different perspectives than in the USA and Great Britain (Bonke, 2005). To a great extent, the focus has been on public solutions in relation to economically vulnerable groups. However, through liberalization, the prerequisites for protecting children have gradually changed. In line with this, Scandinavian consumer research has expanded and become wider. Today, market researchers, political scientists, anthropologists, historians, etc. are studying consumption from different perspectives and theoretical standpoints (Bjurström, 2004; Ekström & Brembeck, 2004; Johansson, 2006). Scandinavian consumer research is a dynamic field where new objects of study, such as consumerism and consumption-related identities, have caught interest among several researchers (Bjurström, 2004). In addition, a number of aspects besides age that are significant for consumer socialization, a process where young people inherit knowledge, attitudes and abilities which are essential in their function as consumers on a market (Roedder John, 1999), have become focus in different studies (Tufte, 2007). To a greater extent, researchers have also started to directly ask children themselves, not only parents and other adults in children's surroundings (Tufte, 2007). Consequently, Scandinavian research about children's consumption is a dynamic and expanding field consisting of studies from different disciplines. Thus, in order to review the spread of Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers, a theoretical framework that incorporates different parts of children's lives is necessary.

Theoretical framework

Focus in earlier Scandinavian research has often been on consumption in relation to limited parts of children's lives (Lundby, 2008). But children's lives and development is multidimensional. Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) created a theory which has been called 'the ecology of human development', in which he pointed out that development is contextual and affected by interaction. In this article, Bronfenbrenner's theory is used as a stepping stone to

depict what parts of children's lives are investigated by Scandinavian research. The theory is useful because it highlights aspects of children's lives that rarely are discussed in consumer research, such as the relation between different contexts that surrounds the child. Because of the dynamic and expanding character of Scandinavian research, it is important that field of research is analyzed in a comprehensive way.

Method

This review examined Scandinavian consumer research on tweens. An information search on the Internet was made, using databases such as LIBRIS, ELIN, bibliotek.dk, and BIBSYS, and web sites connected to universities and research centers. Different concepts were used in several combinations, in Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and English. In addition, an email was sent to 65 researchers in the field. We asked for relevant publications, research environments and academics connected to consumer research. Reference lists in collected books and articles were also reviewed, in order to find more publications: often recurring titles in the literature were seen as central.

Evaluation and Systematizing

Evaluation of literature was based on three criteria:

- The publication should be from the years 1990-2007.
- It should be about Scandinavian children between 7 and 12 years old.
- It should be informative about some part of their consumption patterns.

The Scandinavian countries were selected because, as been mentioned, children as consumers have become an expanding field and an often discussed topic in these countries. Furthermore,

the Scandinavian countries share, to a high degree, common characteristics as changing welfare state regimes (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990).

By consumption patterns we referred to a wide range of aspects: what children buy; how much/often they buy it; what economic resources they have; what causes the consumption (e.g. peer pressure); how they consume (e.g. with friends and family) and how their social relations are related to consumption. However, consumption in the sense of eating has not been included. For readers interested in this area, which moves between consumption and nutrient science, following references might be of interest: Brembeck, 2007; Johansson, 2007; Kjørholt, 2005; Thøstedt & Sællerberg, 2006; Vebjørn & Brembeck, 2005.

Characteristics of the Material

When we could not find any more publications that agreed with the three criteria mentioned earlier, we arrived at the final sample of 35 studies, most of them published after the year 2000. The origin of the studies was to a high degree equally distributed between the countries, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Origin of the collected studies*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of studies</i>
Sweden	10
Norway	8
Denmark	10
From more than one country	7

The sample included mainly published research results. In addition, some public reports and working papers were included. Today there is a wide range of ongoing studies in consumer research. Working papers might point out the latest results and theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, the material covers a wide range of disciplines. Most publications belong to sociology (11) and marketing (11). But research from social work (4), ethnology (3), anthropology (1) and media communication (1) can also be found in the collected studies. In addition, some publications are multi-disciplinary (5). Most of the studies included qualitative methods or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: interviews were the most common procedure. A majority of the interviews had been performed with children as informants. Besides interviews, some researchers used questionnaires or a combination of both these methods. A minority of the studies included other methods: drawings, Christmas lists, mobile messages, essays and budgets.

Consumer research is a multidimensional field: it includes different disciplines which investigate consumption among children by using different concepts. In this way, claiming to be all-encompassing would be more than inappropriate. However, the aim is to gain a more composite picture of the Scandinavian consumer research. The final material was analyzed by a qualitative thematic analysis. The following presentation of results elaborates the findings according to figures based on The Ecology of Human Development.

Results

As mentioned at the outset, Bronfenbrenner's model provides a theoretical frame that presents children's social world on different levels. According to this perspective, children's lives are

affected by several contexts on different analytical levels. The first level constitutes of the subject, namely the child.

What then, may the Scandinavian research tell us about the child as a consumer? Looking at the findings, there are some studies which shows that tweens have, to some degree, become more autonomous consumers with their own economic resources (Holmberg, 2007; Oelsen, 2003b; Oelsen, 2004; Tufte, 2006). They seem to reflect upon, and be aware of, consumption and sometimes experience fear if they lack economic resources (Brusdal, 2000a; Harju, 2005; Harju, 2008; Johansson, 2005). Furthermore, the tween years can be seen as an eventful time. New interests develop and children start to purchase new products (Hansen, 2002; Johansson, 2005), such as magazines and clothes (Brusdal, 2000b; Näsman & von Gerber, 2001). Boys were in general more interested in using computer games and cartoons, while girls showed more interest in radio, magazines and books (Hansen, 2002; Tufte, 2007). Appearances seem to be important, especially for girls (Johansson, 2005; Brusdal, 2001). One exception is a study of Johansson (2005) where some girls reported that the tweens years was a free zone where appearance was less significant. Class and ethnicity are aspects that are absent in the collected research. In addition, few of the studies have investigated children younger than 10 years old.

How children experience consumption is, necessarily, related to their social relationships. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the micro level (see Figure 1), which consists of children's local environment, is very important for children. Thereby, we must ask if the Scandinavian research has investigated the context closest to the child.

Figure 1. *The micro level*

Most of the Scandinavian studies can be placed on this level; peers, school, parents and leisure activities were common features. Various aspects of consumption seem to be a frequently occurring part of the interplay on the micro level: between children and parents; and between children and peers. The results about parents seem to be diversified: parents worried about the commercialization of childhood but initiated at the same time certain consumption for their children (Brusdal, 2005a; Brusdal, 2005c; Brusdal, 2006); parents had large impact on consumption among children (Brusdal, 2006; Tingstad, 2007; Oelsen 2004), but children also influenced their parents (Brembeck, 1996; Frønes, 2003; Johansson, 1996; Näsman & von Gerber, 2001; Näsman & von Gerber, 2003; Mikkelsen & Kümpel, 2006). Looking at peers, consumption often influences relationships with friends (Brusdal, 2001;

Brusdal, 2005b; Tufte, 2004; Wærdahl, 2003) and ‘the right’ consumption may be a protection against exclusion (Wærdahl, 2003). Children are gradually forced to reflect upon norms of consumption in social relations (Brusdal, 2001; Thorød, 2006) and these norms are often gendered (Hansen, 2002; Tufte, 2004; Tufte, 2006; Tufte, 2007; Wærdahl, 2003). The costs in childhood seemed to be well known among parents (Bonke, 2005; Hjort, 2004; Rysst, 2006; Thorød, 2006). However, the research does not tell us if, and how, these group norms around consumption can vary depending on aspects like school and neighborhood.

Furthermore, focus on leisure activities is not very common in the research. Some researchers mention that children’s activities are expensive and that this can be problematic (Bonke, 2005; Thorød, 2006). But few studies have looked at leisure activities as social arenas.

Moving on to school, none of the studies have been looking at the school as an institution.

In summary, family, peers, leisure activities and school are contexts that have been subject to investigation , even if the amount of research on each context varies. However, it seems that these contexts mainly are investigated in isolation from each other. Bronfenbrenner (1979) claims that interaction between these contexts may have an impact on the subject.

Consequently, the next level, which he called the meso level, consists of relationships between the contexts on the micro level (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *The meso level*

Negotiations and development of norm systems can be expected on this level. However, the meso level is rarely represented in this research review. In the results it is clear that parents relate to norms in their children's peer groups (Brusdal, 2005a). But there is less information about how parents interact with other parents, or how parents interact with teachers. Thus, to a high degree, interaction between different contexts seems to be a missing piece in Scandinavian consumer research on tweens. Besides the micro and the meso levels, which clearly may be of high importance to children's consumer behavior, there are two more levels in the theory of Bronfenbrenner: the exo level and the macro level, which may be seen as a framework for modern childhood (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The exo and the macro levels.*

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the exo level consists of forces that may affect behavior among the adults around children, and thereby also may have an indirect effect on the children's behavior. These forces may, for example, consist of the parents' workplace, school board and local policy. However, these aspects are rarely discussed in the Scandinavian research. In Figure 4 media is also placed on the exo level. Media, however, may play a significant part on all levels: media communicates information and can affect expectations and norms among individuals. In the result, is evident that media to a large extent influence everyday life for children. Spare time among tweens was to a large extent characterized by activities that were connected to media: TV, computers and mobile phones (Hansen, 2002; Oelsen, 2003a). In a study of Brembeck and Johansson (1996), all children watched TV almost every day. Children may, to a high extent, control their use of different media because of the increasing number of electronic media (Hansen, 2002; Von Felitzen, 2003). Media also

tended to take more time for children as they grow older (Hansen, Halling & Carsten Nielsen, 2004; von Felitzien, 2003). Furthermore, girls were more oriented towards media that can establish social relationships, such as mobiles and chat rooms on the Internet (Tufte, 2007). Boys around 12 years old often had expensive media equipment in their rooms, while girls more often had soft and cozy toys (Tufte, 2006; Wærdahl, 2003). Most of the quoted studies have been looking at media consumption in the form of time and access. Only a few have been going deeper into how children and parents understand and use different media (Brembeck & Johansson, 1996; Johansson, 2000; Oelsen, 2003a). Through media, children also come in contact with commercials. Children's understanding of commercials increases as they get older (Martensen, 2006): children between 7 to 8 years old often manage to separate commercials from other programs; and this ability is often well developed among 10 to 12-year-olds (Andersen Pynt, 2006). It is also around the years 10 to 12 that children often become skeptical, selective, and less interested in commercials than before (Andersen Pynt, 2006).

Moving on to the macro level, we find broad and abstract patterns, such as individualization and globalization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the model above, a selection of aspects are mentioned in order to exemplify the levels: individualization, globalization, laws and national values. In the Scandinavian research, these aspects are mainly used as frameworks, and their possible influences on children as consumers are to a high degree absent.

Although the puzzle is useful for visualizing the collected research, like any visualization it tends to reify a highly complex process. The pieces presented in the figure should be interpreted as examples of the levels, not as a complete picture of reality. In addition, the exo and the macro levels bring some analytical difficulties into the picture since the levels consist of aspects that are very different concerning levels of abstraction. The causal relationship

between aspects is unclear, and the causal chain down to children's consumer behavior is difficult to depict. Furthermore, some aspects, for example, national values and individualization, are conceptually intertwined. This complexity is, to a high degree, absent in Scandinavian research. As the arrows indicate, there is interaction among the macro, exo and micro levels, which complicates the area of children as consumers even more. The studies, however, are not very informative about interaction between pieces of the outer layer and pieces of the inner layers.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this article was to critically review the spread of the aggregated Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers, from the years 1990 – 2007. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective was used in order to investigate the analytical levels in the research. To conclude, Scandinavian consumer research on tweens is a dynamic field where several studies have been conducted over the past twenty years. The research has mainly focused on the child and interpersonal relations, for example between children and parents. The societal transformations in Scandinavia, that were mentioned at the outset, such as the changing discourse regarding children's role in consumer society, seem to have been less investigated, even though the Scandinavian research to a high extent is connected to sociology and marketing. Figure 4 presents tendencies on the spread of the aggregated Scandinavian research on tweens as consumers.

Figure 5. *The knowledge puzzle of Scandinavian consumer research on tweens*

Above, pieces in the puzzle are presented in different shades, from white to black, where black indicate *well researched* and white indicate *lack of research*. Much knowledge has been gathered about the child as a consumer at the so-called micro level, the level that is closest to the child. However, the main focus in Scandinavian research has been on children older than ten years of age. This might be questioned. In a time where children often are portrayed as consumers at young ages it is important to investigate how children's consumer behavior develops during early childhood. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge on how different family constellations influence children's consumption. Moving on to school and leisure activities, one way of going further in these areas could be to compare different contexts and their effect on children's consumer behavior, such as leisure activities and schools.

The exo level (aspects that can have an indirect effect on children's consumer behavior) has one piece that occurs relatively often in the Scandinavian research reviewed here, namely media. However, media is often discussed in a more abstract way and often connected to commercials. One way of developing this area could be to go deeper into the new technology, such as mobile phones, and investigate how children's use of the products changes during the tween years. On the exo level there are also three pieces that have not been discussed to the same degree as media: the parents' workplace, school board and local policy. Parents' workplace may be interesting because it often constitutes the parents' main economic source. For example, how are children affected if the economic source is changed? Or how would a class change made by the parents affect their children's consumer behavior and preferences? School boards are also an underexplored area. Here we need to understand how basic rules around consumption, for example if mobile phones are allowed in school, affect children's consumption. Local policy is another piece that is relatively uninvestigated. Investigating local policy could mainly be about applications of different laws, for example, around social welfare. In addition one could investigate how different housing policies and segregation processes might affect consumption patterns among children.

The final level, the macro level, might be the most problematic level to investigate because of the abstract character of the pieces. However, it can be useful as a theoretical framework. Perhaps the impact of globalization, national values, individualization and laws might also become clearer by historical studies. In addition, comparative studies on different countries could be useful in order to learn more about values and laws around consumption and work.

What can be seen as the most interesting finding of this study is the lack of research on interaction between different contexts in the puzzle. There are interaction and influence in different directions among all the pieces. For example, a change in laws around welfare can

affect the economic source for parents. Thereby, the parent's consumer behavior might be modified, which can influence the child's consumption. In addition, these influences can also go in different directions. The child can influence his or her parents' consumer behavior and attitude towards consumption of different products, etc. Therefore, investigating the connection between different pieces is difficult because of the complexity. However, the connections are important and should not be underestimated.

To sum up, Scandinavian research on tweens and consumption includes several interesting pieces of knowledge. However, many pieces are still relatively unexplored. Consequently, for future research there are plenty of opportunities for fruitful contributions to this dynamic puzzle of knowledge. In times of societal transformations in Scandinavia, such research is increasingly important.

Implications

In the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, societal transformations that changes the frames for modern childhood are taking place. In line with this, the way children are portrayed as consumers has gradually changed, from vulnerable beings towards competent actors in their own lives. Tweens have also become more autonomous, and reflective, consumers with their own economic resources. Thus, social marketers, teachers, parents, and others may be made more welcome by addressing these children directly and encouraging their individuality. However, relations with peers and parents still seem to influence consumer behavior in tweens. Thus, it is also important to address the child as part of a system consisting of different levels that influence the consumer behavior.

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