

## Chapter 5

# The Emergence of the Tween Market and the Expansion of Children's Consumer Culture

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When I grew up in the 1970s, there was no such thing as a tween. I remember being 11 or 12 years old and feeling like I was on the cusp of being something else. I knew I was becoming a teenager. One of the major moments that signalled this shift to me was the Christmas that I realized my wish list did not contain the usual items; instead of toys, the list only contained clothes, make-up, and the latest album from my favourite singer, Rick Springfield. I knew I was leaving my childhood behind, but I also knew I was not quite a teenager yet. At that moment I never thought about myself as a "tween." I had never heard of this term, nor had any of my friends or my parents. In fact, this term was not really used widely until the mid-1990s with the huge success of the Spice Girls. But that is what I was at that moment: a tween, a young girl in the liminal spaces between being a child and being a teen.

Today there is a verifiable tween universe. There is a whole array of commercial products, media texts, and digital spaces that are constructed for the tween, such as *Space Pop* on YouTube, Disney's array of live-action comedies such as *Liv and Maddie*, *Austin and Ally*, and *Bunk'd*, and Mattel's transmedia franchises (books, toys, TV shows, and movies) *Ever After High* and *Monster High*. Parenting magazines have advice columns on how to parent tweens. Girls even look forward to becoming a tween at the age of seven or eight. To celebrate, they can go to one of "Glama Gal Tween Spa's" nine locations in Ontario. One of the most obvious signs that the tween has "made it" is the creation of the exclusive retail space Justice (with a heart over the "I"), located in many suburban shopping malls in Canada. The store is bright, almost garish. It seems as if every item is covered in sequins, emojis, or pictures of chihuahuas wearing tiaras. T-shirts are emboldened with pictures of mythological creatures such as unicorns or pink tigers licking ice cream cones, and boldly state such things as "Happier than a bird with a french fry," "Everyone loves a happy girl," and "Keep calm and add more sprinkles." I find this store overwhelming, but of course, this store isn't aimed at me—it is aimed directly at the tween girl consumer.

Today, the tween is a well-defined, verifiable segment of the marketplace and a category of subjectivity. In the same way that the 1940s and 1950s brought the world the teenager (Palladino, 1996; Schrum, 2004), the late 1980s and early 1990s brought the world the tween. Today the tween girl is a large and lucrative market segment. It was estimated in

2013 that the tween in the United States was responsible for over US\$200 billion in sales each year: \$43 billion from their own money and \$157 billion spent by parents on behalf of tweens (Popai, 2013). The tween store Justice does particularly well in Canada, for some reason. In 2014, there were 23 stores in Canada; by 2016 there were 42 stores (Ascena Retail Group Inc., 2016). Overall, as of 2017, Justice has over 900 stores in total in the United States, Canada, Russia, and the Middle East.

## History of the Tween

One of the first references of the term “tween” was in 1987 in an article written for the *U.S. News and World Report* by journalist Alice Z. Cuneo (1987). Cuneo suggested that in the United States there were 25 million “tweens, from nine to 15-years-old” who were “no longer viewed as the \$2 allowance crowd” (p. 51). Instead, they bought or influenced over \$45 billion worth of merchandise a year (p. 51). It was this buying power that advertisers and marketers started to notice.

There were some precursors to the tween prior to the 1980s. In the 1950s and 1960s teen girls were sometimes called “teenyboppers.” Teenyboppers, however, were largely positioned as fans—literally, small fans of bop music. They were the screaming girls that rushed the stages of Elvis Presley concerts or who plastered their bedrooms with pictures of their favourite Beatle. The teenybopper was not a market segment the way that the tween became in the 1980s. During the same era, retail stores and clothing manufacturers categorized girls as subteens or preteens, but this distinction never really took hold as a site of subjectivity beyond such spaces. Furthermore, boys were not categorized as preteens, subteens, or teenyboppers; these terms were very gendered. There were other references to tweens prior to 1987; for example, a department store in Michigan had a junior girl’s department called “twixt and tween” (Cook, 2004a). But these references came and went, and didn’t really stick as a defining part of childhood. The 1987 reference was the beginning of a dramatic swing toward tweens as a legitimate market segment and category of subjectivity. If I had been a child of the late 1990s I would have known that my Christmas wish list was the wish list of a tween girl. But in the 1970s there was no sense of myself being a tween.

Once advertisers and marketers began to notice the buying power of the tween in 1987, it did not take long for the tween to crystallize as a legitimate market segment. By the early 1990s advertisers began to talk to tweens as a market, manufacturers and retailers began to see them as customers, and the media began to gather them as audiences. While the history of this is too big to go into detail here in this chapter, there is room to highlight a few key conditions that occurred to form the tween as a segment. First, for the first time in history, people were living longer and having fewer children. This shift in demographics meant that young people were outnumbered by their baby boomer elders (this partly explains the vast attention paid to the “yuppie” in the 1980s). The implications of this meant smaller families and grandparents living longer. This dynamic resulted in more resources funnelled to young people. This is the allowance effect: Fewer children in a family increases the chances that the allowances will be bigger, and because a child might have four living grandparents instead of one, there will be more monetary gifts from more grandparents. Young people had access to more disposable income than ever before. Smaller families also meant that children had more opportunities to influence the

purchasing decisions of the family; fewer brothers and sisters meant that one child could easily influence the choices the family made in the marketplace. Ultimately, due to demographic shifts, young people were gaining more economic power to either buy or influence purchases (Coulter, 2014; Sutherland & Thompson, 2003).

A second shift was that in the 1980s there was major interest from governments on the health effects of such activities as smoking, alcohol, and drugs on the population's health (this is the decade that began the war on drugs). Since the habits of smoking, drinking, or doing drugs often start during adolescence, governments invested huge amounts of money studying how to get teenagers to not engage in these activities. They began to realize that talking to teenagers was too late. In order to get a teenager not to smoke, they had to get the message to them that smoking was bad for their health before they became teens. But they couldn't just talk to them as children, or the messages wouldn't carry any weight when the teen was faced with the decision to smoke or not—they had to be talked to as teens before they became teens for the messaging to take hold. Health and Welfare Canada, for example, designed the Break Free advertising campaign, featuring Canadian superstar Luba, to dissuade the "pre-smoking demographic." Not surprisingly, marketers and advertisers were listening, and they applied the same logic: If a company wanted teenagers as customers, they had to talk to them as potential teen customers before they became teens (Coulter, 2014).

A third, and perhaps most important, shift was that commercial media began to open up spaces for girls and made girls a lucrative audience. Prior to the 1980s girls were largely ignored as an audience. The assumed audience of most children's television was boys. The reason for this was that before the age of cable, when most homes had only a few television stations, the way television shows made money was to gather a big audience; the larger the audience, the more money a station could sell the advertising time for. This concept is often referred to as the "audience as commodity," where the audience's attention is the commodity that is sold to advertisers (Smythe, 1981). It was thought that boys would not watch shows for girls, whereas girls would watch shows geared for boys (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 49; Seiter, 1993, p. 47). Many shows had a token girl, just to placate the girl audience. Examples include Minnie Mouse and Daisy Duck from the Disney cartoons, Wonder Woman from *Super Friends*, or Daphne and Velma from *Scooby-Doo*. Media producers designed these female characters to maintain the interest of a girl audience without being central enough to alienate the boy audience (Coulter 2014).

But in the 1980s there were changes in the regulation of children's television that made the girl a viable market and a lucrative audience. Prior to the 1980s, regulations in Canada and the United States positioned the child consumer/audience member as vulnerable to explicit commercialization. There were regulations in place by both the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in the United States and the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in Canada to protect children from advertising as it was seen as "inherently unfair and deceptive." Policy-makers thought that children were "too young to understand the selling and purpose of, or otherwise comprehend or evaluate, the advertising" (FTC Staff Report from 1978, as cited in Kline, 1993, p. 213). These arguments started to erode as governments under the 1980s Reagan and Mulroney administrations began to offload governmental powers onto corporations and the marketplace.

One of the regulations that was repealed in the United States during this time was the rule that there must be a separation between programs and commercials. Prior to this shows had tight bumpers that would indicate to audiences that the show was over and the commercials had started by stating “Stay tuned, we will right back after these commercial messages.” This statement helped the child audience differentiate between the show and the commercials. The other side of this regulation repeal was that television shows could now have characters that were also on products. Previously, products and TV characters had to be distinct. This is why most of the breakfast cereal characters were unique to the advertisements and did not appear elsewhere in the media, such as Tony the Tiger from Frosted Flakes, Toucan Sam of Fruit Loops, and Snap, Crackle, and Pop of Rice Krispies fame.

With the deregulation, the promotion of products could now take place within a television show. The outcome was that children’s television shows became vehicles for selling toys. Shows such as *Strawberry Shortcake* and *The Smurfs* became 22-minute advertisements for a whole range of licensed merchandise. Through the magic of character licensing, a child could buy a whole range of consumer products adorned with their favourite characters, from birthday party favours to toys, school supplies, clothes, and even bedding. The value of a show for its producers was no longer about the size of the audience it could attract but the amount of licensed items that could be sold to its audience members. And thus, the girl audience became worth it. For example, it was worth it for the company Those Characters From Cleveland, the producers of *Strawberry Shortcake*, to have a smaller audience if they could encourage the girls watching to go out and buy the figures of Strawberry and all her “berry nice friends,” along with the models of Strawberryland and the Strawberry Shortcake bathing suits, towels, and sheets. By 1986 *Strawberry Shortcake* was America’s top-selling toy doll and had appeared on hundreds of products selling more than US\$1 billion worth of merchandise (Englehardt, 1986, p. 73).

While the regulation was repealed in the United States, its impact spilled over into Canada. Most of the provinces, with the exception of Quebec, which still has tight laws on advertising to children under the age of 12, followed suit and loosened their laws to keep up with the American children’s entertainment industry.

The outcome of deregulation was twofold. First, it legitimized children as competent, market-savvy consumers who no longer needed the protection of governments. Second, it opened up spaces for commercial media to produce content targeted solely at girls. Media companies such as Those Characters From Cleveland conducted extensive focus groups and interviews with girls to produce a show and characters that appealed to girls. In television, perhaps for the first time, the girl audience was an audience worth pursuing. The impact of deregulation should not be understated—it caused a radical shift in how both children and girls were understood as a market by corporations. Both children and girls became seen as competent consumers who deserved to have the media and the marketplace produce content specifically for their own desires and needs. It was not a natural progression for children and girls to be considered lucrative audiences and market segments; it was changes in policy that created the conditions for this radical shift.

## “Knowing” the Tween

The tween is usually defined as being between ages 8–12, or sometimes 7–14, or even up to the age of 15, as Cuneo suggested in 1987. It is a category that has slippery edges that shift depending on which company or organization is referring to them. But the idea is

the same: The tween is in between being a child and being a teenager. She is an age-based market segment who is chronologically, biologically, and sociologically on the cusp of being something else (Cook & Kaiser, 2004), but she is not there yet. Thus the tween is perched in the liminal spaces between childhood and teenagehood (the use of the term “teenagehood” as opposed to adolescence specifically highlights how the teen is a market construct whereas adolescence is understood as a stage of physiological and psychosocial development defined by developmental psychology). The tween is the identity of a consuming youth slowly distancing herself from childhood to gain the freedoms that come with being a teenager. The tween belongs to neither category completely but is embedded in both simultaneously (Cody, 2012).

What it means to be a tween in this state of liminality is defined differently by different companies, in different industries, and in different cultural contexts. For example, in a North American context, Justice describes the tween in its 2013 annual report:

Ever wonder what Being Tween is all about? Justice stores and Brothers online are at the forefront of tween fashion across the country and around the globe. It’s about celebrating the fun and adventures of life during the ages of 7 to 12—the tween years. It’s hot fashions. Cool prices. And extraordinary customer experiences. (Tween Brands, 2013)

Compare this with 612 League, an Indian clothing company that defines itself as the first Indian tween clothing company. The company explicitly states that it

celebrates a child’s inner star—the internal strength that encourages them to stand tall, reach high and dream big. It takes pride in being part of the transformation from kids to teenagers who will grow up to be the people who make a difference tomorrow. The brand epitomizes today’s children—smart, savvy, fashionable and active—the Global Indians of tomorrow. (612 League, n.d., para. 6)

Here the tween is positioned as a “smart” and “savvy” consumer who is preparing to become part of India’s global workforce, a radical difference from Justice’s definition of the tween as celebrating the “fun and adventures of life.”

The tween girl that is described by companies like Justice or 612 League is not a real girl. She did not exist in the wilderness of Canadian suburbs waiting to be “discovered” in the way a marine biologist might discover a previously unknown species of fish in the depths of the ocean. Even though this is how market research companies describe it, they often state that they have “discovered” or “found” a new market segment in the trade publications. While this reveals a little bit about the arrogance of the advertising industry, it also provides insight into the ways that the dynamic forces of consumer capitalism work to segment young people into narrower, tighter marketing niches that offer more intense marketing opportunities.

Instead of being “discovered,” tweens are an image or construction of an ideal girl imagined by a range of outlets, including the popular press, retail outlets, marketing research, advertising, and the media. The tween girl is used by advertisers, marketers, and the media to illustrate the idealized market segment of tween. The tween girl that is discovered is not a “sentient being with a biography,” she is not a “living, breathing person but rather a social construction—an assemblage of qualities, beliefs, and conjectures

concerning the 'nature' and motivation" of girls (Cook, 2007, p. 38). She is a rhetorical and figurative construct of an age-based consumer. She is what Cook (2004a) calls "a figment of the commercial imagination" (p. 7) that is produced according to the needs and logics of the cultural industries of young people.

It is helpful to think of the tween as a commercial persona. The word "persona" is etymologically derived from the Latin word for mask or character, often used in literature to refer to a social role in a script played by an actor. A commercial persona builds out of these etymological roots. Instead of being an actual live person, the tween is a portrait of selected attributes of an ideal consumer; she is a symbolic representation of demographic and psychographic data of a market segment in the marketplace. Commercial personae operate as a quick way to articulate a market segment. A persona is not to be confused with a character in advertising, such as the Hathaway Man, the Jolly Green Giant, or even the Marlboro Man. The persona functions as a means of symbolically representing a market segment.

Understanding the tween as a social construction fits within the theoretical framings of critical childhood studies that suggest that the categories of young people are socially, culturally, politically, and economically constituted within particular moments and spaces (see James, Jenks, & Prout, 2004; Zelizer, 1994). These constitutions serve the needs of adult-centred social, cultural, political, and economic systems. In this case, the framing of the tween fits the needs of the market in the context of neoliberal capitalism.

Discursively constructing tweens as a persona is a "commercial epistemology" (Cook, 2011) in which the industries of the marketplace, such as marketers, advertisers, market researchers, the media, retailers, and so on, identify and articulate a market segment according to its own needs and logics. An epistemology is a process of "knowing," where knowledge is understood not to be the discovery of a verifiable truth but instead is a deeply ideological process that both describes and constructs an object at the same time. Cook defines the commercial epistemologies of children's consumption

as ways of "knowing" about children and childhood that arise from the interested positions of those whose livelihoods revolve around ascertaining the marketability of goods and ideas. One might think of commercial epistemologies as lenses through which market actors see and apprehend children and childhood for specific purposes and toward particular ends. (Cook, 2011, p. 258)

Cook is not the only author to state this. Frank Cochoy (1998) argues that marketing itself is deeply ideological because it is essentially a "body of expertise that simultaneously describes and constructs its subject matter" (as cited in Marion, 2005, p. 3). Ien Ang has made similar arguments about the construction of the television audience. Ang (1991) argues that the audience "only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institution in the interest of the institutions" (p. 2). Ang states that an audience is not "an ontological given by a socially constituted and institutionally produced category" (p. 3). All of these authors highlight how companies and industries organize and define segments of the population in ways that contribute to the financial growth of the companies and industries.

Justice, for example, spends a great deal of time and energy trying to "know" or imagine who the tween girl is and articulating this notion of tweenness to its partners (such as its advertisers or manufacturers), employees, and girl consumers. It frames the

tween girl as focused on fun, adventure (although it is not clear what this adventure is), and fashion. In 2016, Justice hired the company Piper Jaffray, an asset management firm, for their expertise with retail analysis<sup>1</sup> to help the company compete with such retailers as Old Navy and Walmart, where the clothes are cheaper. Interestingly, this is not the case in Canada. The stores here consistently outperform their American counterparts. Since competing on price point with these huge retailers is too difficult—Justice, in other words, cannot “out-value” them—Justice’s solution is to “out-tween” them (Lynch, 2016). To “out-tween” its competitors, Justice and Piper Jaffray got to “know” its customers. The company’s president and CEO, Brian Lynch, boldly stated

everything we did at Justice—everything—strategy, change, adjustments that we made was because, frankly, our customers told us. When I said piles of research, literally piles of focus groups, research, surveys, videotapes, on what our customers said they like and didn’t like” (p. 5). Based on this research, Justice deems that the girl is in the “inventive stage,” everything is different, “today she wants to be an athlete, tomorrow she wants to be a fashion model, next week she wants to be an astronaut, it changes every day.” (Lynch, 2016)

This is an example of commercial epistemology: Justice and Piper Jaffray have done “piles of research” to “know” that the tween girl is in an “inventive” stage. They conducted research with a particular objective, in this case the objective of understanding middle-class girls as consumers. The research design, including the focus of the questions asked, the participants included, and the types of information gathered is all geared to “knowing” girls as consumers. Other forms of knowledge, such as understanding girls as political actors, or finding ways to help girls build confidence, or how girls navigate the misogynist structures of school, are not relevant. While commercial media and market research all claim to “know” segments, they only know them as consumers, not as deep, complicated, nuanced human beings. Such information is not relevant. What is relevant is the type of information that can be used to “out-tween” other retailers and sell more goods (at higher margins) to tween girls. The tweens that Justice then presents in its catalogues, or describes in its corporate literature as being “in the inventive stage” or being full of “fun and adventure,” are personifications of their research findings. They are not live, sentient beings, but are instead personified representations of the discursive constructions of girlhood (Coulter, 2014).

Boys are rarely defined as tweens, and when they are they are framed in very different terms due mostly to the fact that consumption is gendered as a feminized space, so the tween as a consumer category is most often feminized (Lury, 1995; Nava, 1992). In fact, Tween Brands, the corporate owner of Justice, had to close its boy’s store, Brothers, in 2015 because it was underperforming. Apparently, boys do not like to be defined as tweens in retail spaces, nor do they care much about buying clothes at a higher price point from a store that has “out-tweened” its competitors.

## Tween Girl as the Fun Girl

The tween girl that Justice articulates is a girl in a state of fun. The aesthetic of fun runs through Justice’s entire corporate catalogue, which is not surprising, given that it is clearly stated in the company’s annual report in 2013. There is fun everywhere. The corporate

reward points are called “Fun Bucks,” and every image in the online catalogue shows girls in states of extreme fun. The models pose together, with their mouths wide open in a full state of laughter. There are rarely any poses of girls in states of concentration or reflection—no other emotions are presented. It is always fun. The graphic T-shirts boldly state “Frappes, friends and fun,” “Every Cool Girl Needs a Fun BFF,” “Happy girls are the prettiest,” “When in doubt . . . Laugh,” and perhaps most disturbingly, “Hey you, Smile” (the demand yelled out by cat callers everywhere).

This positioning of the tween girl as being in a constant state of fun reveals much about the cultural expectations of girls and girlhood. Fun is a gendered activity. While the boy models from the now defunct Brothers line are positioned in states of pleasure, they are not solely shown in a state of “ecstasy of fun.” Rather, they are often engaged in activity or concentrating on what they are doing (while dressed in Brothers clothes, of course). The “graphic Ts” for boys read “Crushing it,” “Faster than fast,” “Just win,” “Can’t stop winning,” and “#2 Fast 4U.”

This is reminiscent of a long visual history in which females are shown in passive positions while males are presented in states of activity (see Goffman, 1979), but there is more to it than this. Justice’s emphasis on fun reveals the social pressures on girls to be only in a state of fun. This singularity of emotion functions as a way to keep girls, and by extension women, from being political. The girl that asks political questions, fights systemic sexism in her school, challenges rape culture, pushes back and demands why boys get to worry about winning (like the T-shirt states) while girls should drink frappes, or even just says “no” is no longer fun. She has disturbed the happiness, she is no longer one of the happy girls that “are the prettiest,” as described by the Justice T-shirt.

Such a girl would be what Sara Ahmed calls a “feminist killjoy.” Ahmed (2010) argues that to be political is to disturb the fantasy of happiness, and thus threaten the status quo (p. 66). She states that figures of happiness are used as political tropes to justify social oppression and hide systemic inequalities. Thus, the pressures on girls to be in a constant state of fun functions as a means to depoliticize girlhood. It is possible to read the T-shirt that states “Happy girls are the prettiest” as a threat. The girl that finds moments of unhappiness, the girl that does not participate in the fun, is no longer “the prettiest,” which according to contemporary beauty culture equates to not having value. Being a “feminist killjoy,” even a tween feminist killjoy, comes at a social cost.

The argument here is not that Justice is conducting research on how to find ways to keep girls from being political, or that depoliticizing girlhood is part of Justice’s corporate strategy. Although, interestingly, there is no reference within the company’s promotional materials or within the company’s corporate literature of why it is called Justice—the term Justice is an empty signifier. Instead, commercial epistemologies take place within a social and political context in which fun is gendered and women are expected to maintain the status quo of happiness.

Recently, in February 2017, Justice updated its Facebook page and website to include a model in a hijab announcing, “SEE YOURSELF IN JUSTICE! Come be a part of something fun, something you. We believe fashion is for every girl and even more of our styles are available in extended sizes than ever before. Check out what’s new: [www.shopjustice.com](http://www.shopjustice.com).” The change is part of the company’s new marketing campaign, “See Yourself in Justice.” According to Keriake Lucas, vice-president of corporate communications at Justice, the campaign is part of the brand’s “message around inclusivity”

(Kuruville, 2017). The company has expanded to include plus-size clothes for tweens and has committed more overtly to a diverse range of representations in their models. In fact, Justice included a model in a hijab in February 2017, when US president Donald Trump mandated travel bans from Muslim countries and when Islamophobia was rising. This can only be seen as a political message.

This change may be part of a broader shift in the cultural expectations of girlhood. At the moment, *Teen Vogue* is one of the few media outlets to politically challenge Donald Trump. In December 2016, *Teen Vogue* ran an op-ed piece entitled “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America,”<sup>2</sup> in which the author, Lauren Duca (2016), presented a clear argument on how Trump used the tactics of gaslighting to garner votes and how he continues to use it to undermine democracy. This op-ed piece received a lot of positive press from mainstream media outlets such as the *Toronto Star*, *NPR*, *The Atlantic*, and the *New York Times*. While these outlets all stated surprise that the teen magazine is “killing it,” feminist media outlets such as *Jezebel*, *Bitch*, *Shameless*, *Powered by a Girl*, and *Rookie* have addressed girls as political actors for years—many of these have girls themselves produce political content. Beyond *Teen Vogue*, there are many other examples of girls being political actors, including Malala Yousafzai, Emma González a vocal advocate for gun control, the #Notmypresident protests that occurred on the online game site Club Penguin, the Radical Brownies of Oakland (now called Radical Monarchs), the many public fights that girls have had over school dress codes that shame girls, and countless other examples. While girls’ activism is not new, what may be new is mainstream media outlets beginning to recognize girls’ political awareness and their desire for content that is politically engaged. Who knows, maybe Justice’s T-shirts in 2018 will state “Activism is the new awesomeness.” I hope so, but I doubt it; while there may be more inclusive representations, the narratives of beauty culture and the silenced female body might just be too strong.

## Tween as a Transnational Category

Justice is growing globally. It has stores in 14 countries, and according to the CEO there is a “ton of demand for Justice internationally” (Lynch, 2016). This expansion is part of a broader trend because many transnational corporations see the tween consumer as a lucrative market. There is a rise of a global girl culture as older companies, such as Disney, Nickelodeon, and Mattel, alongside new companies such as DHX Media, Amazon Prime, and Netflix, vie to dominate the global marketplace by reaching out to tween girls in countries such as China, Russia, and Brazil. In attempting to cater to a global tween girl consumer, these companies privilege age and gender as the core features of tweenhood—to the exclusion of other ethnic, social, and cultural subjectivities. Privileging the universalizing aspects of girlhood—age and gender—erases the racial, ethnic, sexual, bodily, and cultural diversities of girls across and between transnational spaces.

The construction of the tween girl is part of the emergence of a globalized youth culture in which global capitalism homogenizes young people as gendered and aged consuming subjects to the exclusion of collective, regional subjective experiences (Buckingham, 2011; Wise, 2008). The imagined tween girl market is produced as singular, without diversity; the tween is assumed to be a predominantly white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual consumer (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Sweeney, 2008). Dafna Lemish has argued that in the production of content for the international marketplace there is a tendency to erase the

cultural symbols and signs that mark a children's text as foreign or national to produce the "neutral grounds of global culture" (in Chan, Lemish, McMillin, & Parameswaran, 2013, p. 213). This meets the needs of global capitalism since companies can efficiently access global youth markets without having to produce content tailored to specific, individual regions (Wise, 2008). My concern here is that tween girl culture is too narrow, and in an attempt to be global it articulates girlhood as a homogeneous subjectivity to the loss of an understanding of girlhood as an aged moment that is intersectional with other categories of subjectivity such as race, class, sexuality, and, of course, a presumption of gender as a clear subjective category.

## Conclusion

The story of the development of the tween girl market is part of a larger history of children's consumer culture in which children have increasingly become "known" as consumers. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, children have been central to the development of consumer capitalism. At the same time, consumer capitalism has increasingly targeted, framed, and defined young people as consumer markets, and the physiological and psychological stages of youth have been understood according to the logics of the political and economic structures of consumer capitalism. In the 1930s, for example, the children's clothing industry began to define the toddler as a specific stage of childhood (separate from the infant or the child) that warranted a unique style of clothes that could accommodate diapers and the sway back of a child learning to walk. Soon after, various cultural forces worked together to legitimize the toddler as stage of subjectivity (Cook 2004a). In the late 1940s and earlier, the teenager began to appear as a distinct market segment and a new site of subjectivity when an emerging middle class was able to have their adolescent children attend high school and live at home. Young people were looking for ways to differentiate themselves from adult culture, and the marketplace responded by calling them "teenagers" and developing media and goods to cater specifically to their tastes (Palladino 1996; Schrum 2004). The toddler in the 1930s, the teenager in the 1940s and 1950s, and the tween in the 1980s are all examples of segmented categories of young people with origins in consumer culture, as media, manufacturers, retailers, and advertisers segment and bring into being different ages of youth.

Since the 1980s there has been a radical expansion of young people's consumer culture, and not just the tween. The baby, for example, has become a lucrative market segment; Disney has a Disney Baby product line, Baby Einstein (now owned by Disney) provides content for babies, and Toys "R" Us has a whole section of the store appropriately named Babies "R" Us. And, in case one missed that babies are positioned as consumers, the store even carries baby girl onesies that state "Born to Shop." Long gone are the days in the 1970s and 1980s, mentioned earlier, when there was a sentiment to protect young children from advertising because it was seen as deceptive and manipulative. But this issue is bigger than simply a critique of babies being targeted as consumers. Positioning babies as consumers reifies consumption as a natural component of being human. If the baby is "born to shop," then the story told of consumption by these companies and industries is that consumption is part of our DNA; babies as consumers produce the ideology that consumption is innately woven into our humanity.

Yet many scholars in the fields of children's studies and consumer culture studies are pushing back and critiquing this trend by exposing the centrality of the development of young people as consumers to consumer capitalism. Juliet Schor (2004) has stated that children are the "epicenter" of consumer capitalism (p. 9), while Daniel Cook (2004b) has argued that "childhood makes capitalism hum over the long haul" (n.p.). Both of these authors highlight the intense growth of children's media and consumer culture in the past 100 years as marketers have shifted from grouping young people together in large, unwieldy categories to dividing them into smaller, tighter, and more narrowly niched market segments. Instead of simply targeting young people as one homogeneous market, marketers target babies, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age girls and boys, tweens, teens, and college-aged youth. Each of these categories offers new opportunities to gather young people as audiences and consumers. It also provides more opportunities for obsolescence. The 8-year-old girl, for example, does not outgrow her Peppa Pig backpack, but she gets rid of it because it is too "babyish" and replaces it with a new Monster High backpack.

Market segments such as the toddler, the teen, the tween, and even the baby are not natural or inevitable categories of being and did not exist prior to the twentieth century. Instead, they are historical social constructions that have developed within the commercial epistemologies of the media marketplace. Being aware of this means that we can challenge, resist, and possibly even reframe these categories and push back on the commercial logics that are only interested in knowing people as market segments, enticing them to consume more. There are various organizations doing just this. For example, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), founded in 2000, has a number of objectives, including raising public awareness of the harms of the commercialization of childhood, advocating for policy changes, and campaigning for commercial-free spaces. They also provide support resources for schools and parents to do the latter. The organization has had many successful campaigns, including persuading Disney to stop promoting the Baby Einstein videos as educational, preventing Hasbro from producing a line of dolls for 6 year olds based on the burlesque troupe Pussy Cat Dolls, and more recently, in 2017 CCFC pushed Niantic Inc., the producers of Pokémon Go, to not send children under the age of 13 to sponsored locations such as Starbucks or McDonald's as part of the game.

The other organizations that take on this fight as part of their mandate are wide and diverse. These include Common Sense Media, a site that helps families make smart media choices by rating and reviewing media content and providing resources for digital literacy; New Dream, Juliet Schor's site, which, while not specifically geared to children, attempts to empower change in people's consumption habits; and Amy Poehler's Smart Girls, an online space dedicated to supporting young girls who are "changing the world by being themselves" (2017).

In Canada, for the past 15 years, MediaSmarts has provided programs and resources to help children and teens develop their critical-thinking skills and "to engage with the media as active, informed digital citizens" (MediaSmarts, 2017). The site has blogs, lesson plans, tutorials, and workshops. In producing this content, MediaSmarts has partnered with many Canadian organizations, such as the Canadian government, the Entertainment Software Association of Canada, the Girl Guides of Canada, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, and the Canadian Library Association. A recent campaign (2017) is "Project Shift: Creating a Safer Digital World for Young Women," a national multiyear project led by YWCA Canada and funded by the Status of Women Canada. It is critical to

the survival of humanity that such organizations are successful. Positioning children as consumers has implications that go beyond the encroachment of commercial culture into children's culture. The persistent positioning and "knowing" of young people as consumers only, and not addressing them as citizens, has serious consequences for the health of democracy and for the environmental sustainability of the planet.

## Review Questions

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1. What is a commercial epistemology? How do advertisers, marketers, retailers, and the media participate in "knowing" a market segment? Why is the word "knowing" in quotes?
2. What changes occurred in the 1980s that provided the conditions for the development of the tween market segment?
3. Why are girls positioned as tweens much more than boys?
4. Why is the development of the children's market central to the rise of consumer capitalism?
5. How is the positioning of the tween girl as being in a state of fun an example of a commercial epistemology? How is this a political process?

## Activities

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Look up the websites for a major retailer such as Toys "R" Us, Walmart, the Gap, or Joe Fresh, or else look up a major media company such as Disney, Nickelodeon, DHX Media, or Corus. Explore how the company discursively constructs what it means to be a child. Also look for how it frames different types of children (boys, girls, age-based categories, etc.). Things to look for include how does the company segment childhood based on age or gender? Who is represented and who is not? What kinds of activities are the children doing or not doing? What is the company's mission statement? Does it frame its consumers in a particular way? What assumptions are made of the company's child consumers?

Another activity is to conduct a similar type of analysis of a nongovernmental entity, such as Girl Guides, UNICEF, MediaSmarts, the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, Girls Inc., or EU Kids Online. Assess how this organization discursively constructs what it means to be a child. You can ask similar questions as above, but you can also ask what issues is the organization addressing? What solutions does the organization offer? What assumptions are made about children by the organization?

As a third step, it could be helpful to compare the findings from the first activity to the second.

## Further Reading

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- Cook, D. T. (2011). Commercial epistemologies of childhood: "Fun" and the leveraging of children's subjectivities and desires. In D. Zwick & J. Cayla (Eds.), *Inside marketing: Practices, ideologies, devices* (pp. 257-68). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Cross, G. (1997). *Kids' stuff: Toys and the changing world of American childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.