KID CUSTOMER?
Commercialization of playspace and the commodification of childhood

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The growth of commercial playgrounds in the UK is part of a broader process whereby ever greater realms of children’s lives are commodified. McNeal’s theory of the social group of children as a market is introduced as a framework through which commercial playgrounds may be understood. An introduction to commercial playgrounds and the project from which the article is derived sets the context for an analysis of how parents and children perceive and experience these environments, how they are marketed to them and how they consume them. It is found that it is overly simplistic to suggest that these new developments are testimony to the new-found consumer power of children. Children play a marginal role: in the production of these play environments; in contributing to parents’ information field prior to decision-making; and in the visit decision-making process. Some groups of children are found to be more active consumers of these spaces; children with fewer siblings and children outside two-parent families being significantly more likely to contribute to decision-making. However, ‘active consumption’ is not distributed evenly across different types of commercial playground. Of particular significance is that children are more marginal to the decision-making process for family pubs, the domain which has traditionally been the preserve of adults. In conclusion, it is argued that the social group of children is not a primary, secondary or tertiary market. Rather, these new commercial playgrounds provide primarily for the needs of adults (for themselves and with respect to how they want their children to play) and, to a lesser extent, for the needs of children.

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Consumer society and the child

While the growth of consumer society was instrumental to the modernist project (Miller, 1991), until recently, critical theorists tended to view ‘consumption’ with disdain. As Goss (1999: 114) observes, consumption was perceived to imply that ‘“false” needs corrupt basic human needs, hedonistic communities of consumption replace real community, public life gives way to organised commercial spectacles, anonymous transactions displace interpersonal interaction, private solutions are sought to social problems, and democratic politics degenerate into electoral role-playing’. Less negative views of the consumer society have arisen within postmodernism and late modernist projects, with their growing sensitivity to ‘difference’ and to the importance of style, and their recognition that the act of consumption is not a glib process wherein the marketer dupes the consumer. For many social theorists, commodification and commercialization are not regarded as inherently problematic. The geography of consumer society is critically important (Sack, 1992) as new geographies of consumption emerge (Goss, 1993; Gregson and Crewe, 1994) and places are either commodified for consumption (Goss, 1999; Hunt and Frankenber, 1997) or are rebranded and packaged for ‘the greater good’ (Kearns and Philo, 1993; Young et al., 2000). Goss (1999) is among those who recognize that childhood is of central importance to the consumer society. Furthermore, he argues that childhood is critically important to the geography of the consumer society, in that the idealized setting of the retail/built environment can only function through our childlike imaginative capacity to believe in the genius of commodities, and the childlike need for instant gratification. While Goss’s conceptualization of the child is somewhat flawed in that it only presents a passive, simplistic, Apollonian vision of children (Jenks, 1996), it does nevertheless alert us to the significance of childhood in debates on consumption and commodification in consumer society.

Many aspects of childhood have been commodified. Thus, it is commonplace in developed nations to conceive of ‘getting an education’, whereby educational qualifications become a commodity that can be used to access a wider array of life chances. Children’s clothing, from babies through to teenagers, is not merely a functional necessity, but also provides, through the ‘right’ label, a sense of identity and esteem. Children are commonly used as icons by various bodies to mobilize public support for ‘worthwhile’ causes. The commodification of children’s lives is most apparent with respect to play, with the growth in the toy industry (Kline, 1993) and leisure ware, each of which experiences the shifting sands of annual fads and fashions.

McNeal (1992) has theorized that the social group of children is three markets. First, the social group of children is a primary market in that they have money, needs and wants, and the authority and inclination to use the...
former to address the latter two. It is not an insignificant market; McNeal estimated that in the USA children have accumulated $2 billion in savings, and have an annual spend in the order of $8 billion. Second, it is an influence market, which McNeal subdivides into direct and indirect types. As a direct influence market, children request that their parents/guardians purchase goods and services. As an indirect influence market, parents consider child preferences in making purchases. Finally, the social group of children is a future market, in that companies are investing in children with a view to accruing financial gain when they become adults (when they will have greater income of which to dispose).

This tripartite conceptualization is of more general significance to children’s play; there are ‘primary’ concerns (children determining their own play for the here-and-now), ‘secondary’ concerns (children’s play fulfilling useful functions for adults, as well as children) and ‘tertiary’ concerns (children’s play as a means through which the child can develop competencies which will be of use to society). The key issue with respect to ‘children as a market’ is the extent to which children are active agents. Active agency can be expressed with respect to the production, perception, consumption and utilization of children’s playgrounds. Of central importance is the extent to which children are influencing the visit decision-making process.

In this article we consider the commercialization of playgrounds and its significance to the commodification of childhood. An introduction to commercial playgrounds and the project from which this article is derived sets the context for an analysis of how parents and children perceive and experience these centres, how they are marketed to them and how they consume them. We conclude by reflecting on the wider significance of the status of children as consumer. Particular attention is paid to the child’s (active) role in the decision-making process that precedes visits to commercial playgrounds.

The nature of the commercial playground

‘Commercial playgrounds’ is a descriptor that encompasses a range of play environments. Even their common points of reference – the commercial dimension and the playground environment – differ significantly across sites and genres (McKendrick et al., 1999). Nevertheless, it is instructive to conceive of commercial playgrounds in that they generate profits by offering opportunities for play in a designated site. Innovative product design has made possible the concept of an indoor soft-play centre while outdoor play equipment is designed to meet ever more rigorous safety standards (NPFA, 1998). Most commercial playgrounds are situated indoors. Adult viewing areas are situated alongside the play zones. Many of these play zones, particularly those in non-leisure domains, are small and possess
limited equipment, aimed for a ‘younger’ age group. Manipulable soft-play shapes, small ball pools, domestic replica equipment and vehicular replica equipment are typical features in small, enclosed spaces. The most extensive playgrounds tend to be multi-level, replicate the features of small indoor soft-play centres on a larger scale and supplement these with rope swings, net ladders and a variety of slides. Family pub/restaurants tend to provide an outdoor playground, consisting primarily of a multifunctional climbing frame on a ‘safe surface’ to complement its indoor soft-play centre. Equipment tends to be fairly standardized, reflecting its modular construction and equipment supply networks. However, the equipment is packaged and themed to create a brand identity, e.g. Alphabet Zoos, Charlie Chalks, Captain Coconuts, Wacky Warehouses. Children are ‘free’ to interact with one another and the equipment: parents are generally held responsible for their children’s behaviour and safety, but are permitted limited access to the actual play environments.

The commercial playground is a response to three specific sets of circumstances. First, the commercial provider has taken a cue from the success of non-localized playgrounds provided by voluntary sector organizations (Melville, 1999). Examples abound where children will make a specific journey to a playground outside the neighbourhood to partake of a rich playground, either for all children (Melville, 1999), or for specific groups of (generally disabled) children, e.g. sensory playgrounds (Bandt, 1995) and ‘mobility-impaired access’ playgrounds. Second, changing leisure trends and strategies towards urban redevelopment cycles have provided an array of opportunities for creating playgrounds in the built environment. A conjunction of circumstances rendered the transformation of many breweries’ rural estate to ‘family pubs’ a realistic and attractive option: a suburban and rural–urban fringe estate that was losing market-share as part of the backlash against drinking-and-driving, higher disposable incomes of (many) families with young children, the suburbanization of family life and the growth of family leisure, and increased levels of car ownership. Similarly, empty units in town centre ‘industrial’ developments and land-use change provided many opportunities for land-use conversion to playgrounds. Third, and of particular significance in the context of this article, is the growing recognition of the power of children as a market.

While, the existence of formally provided and dedicated spaces for children’s leisure outside the neighbourhood is not, in itself, a radical new departure (Schenker, 1996), in significant ways, the commercial provision of playgrounds is qualitatively different to other commodifications in children’s lives, which tend to be oriented towards the individual child, e.g. toys for birthday presents. Commodification of playgrounds pertains to a shared environment (not the private world of the child), a play experience (as opposed to a product) and generally necessitates parental presence if it is to be enjoyed (whereas the majority of toys are arguably best enjoyed outside
the domain of adults). Although there is some evidence to suggest that some groups of children are less likely to visit these spaces (McKendrick et al., 1998b), in other respects it could be argued that they are inclusive environments (McKendrick et al., 2000). Thus, the ‘collective’ nature of this commodified experience may be less socially regressive than other forms of private, personal consumption by children. Thus, the commercial provision of playgrounds may make important contributions to our understanding of the commodification of children’s lives.

Commodification is here understood, at the micro-level, as making a consumable product of an everyday experience and, at the macro-level, as the net effect of ever greater realms of life becoming consumable products. In this respect, commodification may be used to generate profit (either directly as a good, or indirectly as a loss leader), or it may not. The provision of playgrounds for children is thus understood as a commodification of children’s play, although this commodification may take different forms. Thus, it may be a direct source of profit (e.g. stand-alone indoor adventure playgrounds); it may be a means to draw in other sources of profit (e.g. add-on playgrounds to retail stores such as IKEA); or it may be a public service (e.g. the provision of playgrounds by municipal government). In each case, the everyday experience of children’s play is transformed into an experience that may be consumed in a designated space. This understanding of commodification is broader than that commonly adopted by economists and other economic analysts, such as, for example, Watts (1999: 305), who suggests a narrower definition of a commodity as ‘something useful that can be turned to commercial advantage’. To equate a commodity with a good which commands an exchange value to produce profit is clearly inadequate for the purposes of children’s playgrounds. This narrower focus – on the production of profit through commodification – is here understood as commercialization. As outlined earlier and with respect to commercial playgrounds, profit may primarily be generated through financial transactions of pay-for-play, or profit may primarily be generated through using play (not necessarily on a pay-for-play basis) to draw in adults with children to consume. Thus, playgrounds can become commodified and commercialized, without necessarily effecting a financial transaction from the consumer.

All commodities – such as playgrounds – have a primary use-value. With respect to the commercial playground, this primary use-value is simply to provide a domain for children’s play. However, to understand the true significance of any commodity necessitates consideration of its social qualities. According to Watts (1999: 308), ‘there is . . . a hidden life to commodities and understanding something of this secret life might reveal profound insights into the entire edifice – the society, the culture, the political economy – of commodity-producing systems’. Mapping this challenge to playgrounds, then, suggests that unpacking the commodification of children’s playgrounds may provide a context for understanding better children’s role
in society. Pertinent to such enquiry is the extent to which social relations are embedded in the provision of services (of which the market is a key part), or the provision of services becomes disembedded from social institutions. Do commercial playgrounds reflect and draw from children’s existing status as consumers, or do they create a new child consumer – and, thereby, a new conception of the child? More specifically, to what extent are children able to influence decision-making with respect to whether these playgrounds are accessed and the manner in which they are utilized.

The business of children’s play

This article draws from data collected as part of ‘The Business of Children’s Play’ (BoCP) research project (McKendrick et al., 1998a), which commenced in 1996 with the aim of reviewing the commercial provision of playspace for young children aged between 5 and 12 in the UK. To engage all of the issues with which the research was concerned, the case study area of Greater Manchester, northwest England was selected for detailed analysis. Here, we consider the central theme, which underlies each of these issues – the commercialization of playspace, and the extent to which it commodifies the child. Within this locality there exists a regional chain of indoor soft-play centres, many shops with play areas and several urban family pub/restaurants with play areas; it is also within the catchment area of a children’s theme park and many more family pub/restaurants in the urban–rural fringe.

A carefully balanced and interlinked research design involved work with service providers and service users. Six commercial providers of children’s playgrounds were profiled, formal interviews were conducted with those responsible for the strategic management of their facilities, and informal interviews were undertaken with play centre staff. Furthermore, a database of commercial providers was maintained, on the basis of which a regional mapping of provision was undertaken and a library of promotional material was compiled. With respect to service users, questionnaire surveys, interviews, field observations and video recordings were undertaken with children and their parents. Research was conducted in 10 field sites, 872 families were surveyed, of which 30 were interviewed (adults and children separately), and, in turn, seven participated in a family day-visit/post-visit video-based interview.

The research was based on a multi-method, multi-stage research design (McKendrick, 1999). In the extensive data-collection phase, questionnaire surveys were administered to review patterns of participation and to establish family leisure preferences. Two surveys were conducted, one in the playgrounds and one with parents of school children from four schools in southwest Manchester. The school survey was administered in one school with an affluent catchment area, one with a less affluent catchment area and two schools which serve groups of children with ‘special needs’. Response
rates were typical for surveys of this ilk (circa 50 percent for each school) and the social profile of survey families closely approximated the host populations from which they had been drawn. In the intensive data collection phase, a sequence of interviews with families (adult[s] and child[ren] apart), observational studies, organization case studies and family day-visits/post-visit collective family interviews based on video recordings were used to build up an increasingly more detailed and child-centred perspective on commercial playgrounds.

Each research method met a specific information requirement, but the sum was also greater than its parts, that is, the interlinking of data across stages for case study families and case study organizations ensured that research provided more than a series of discrete insights into play and play centres. Thus, the questionnaire surveys were primarily concerned to elicit from adults a child-focused view of commercial playgrounds and how their child/family made use of them; stage two interviews (with adult[s] and child[ren] apart) were primarily concerned to map the links between commercial playgrounds and other domains; and the family day-visits/post-visit interviews provided detailed case studies of children at play in one commercial playground.

Valuing playspace

The commodification of children’s playgrounds is multifaceted. At the macro-level in society it represents a commodification of play, while at the micro-level inside the playground much play is commodity oriented and the competence of the player and playworker is commodified. The visit to a commercial playground, at least to some extent a specific journey for purpose of play in a spatially and temporally structured environment and often on a pay-for-play basis, represents a commodification of children’s play. Play becomes an experience that can be acquired by those who are willing, are able and have the time to make the journey and the money to purchase ‘the product’ that is play. This much may be taken as given; however, the commodification of playgrounds extends beyond investment in time and money. In the commercial playground, much play is oriented around play utensils; play is equipment intensive. While this does not preclude social interaction and while it does not (necessarily) result in unimaginative play, it does heighten the perceived importance of play products in the act of play. To some, this may be an insidious undercurrent that induces a self-perpetuating cycle of consumption that is initiated, or at least supported, by manufacturers of play products. However, in other respects adventurous playthings provide the means through which children can acquire cultural capital; play is commodified as displays of competence are used by children to enhance their self-esteem among peers and their parents. This is particularly evident with respect to the ‘big slide’ in commercial playgrounds. The majority of
Commercial playgrounds have such a slide, access to which is often regulated by play centre staff and is determined on the basis of height. It is almost a rite of passage and for those who have ‘conquered’ it, it affords credibility.

_BoCP:_ Have you noticed if he’s (7-year-old son) got a favourite piece of apparatus?

_Mum:_ There’s something that . . . I wouldn’t say it was his favourite piece – but in the one in Sale they’ve got a very big, quite a steep, slide, and I don’t know what it is, but he sort of gears himself up, and he climbs up onto this slide, and they’ve got to sit in a sort of sack, and he sits there, and he’s like this, and he’s looking at me . . . And then he takes the sack off and comes back down again! . . . He’s been down it I think twice, and he does that every time we go. And I don’t know why, because I don’t put him under pressure to do it. I’m not bothered whether he goes down it or he doesn’t, but he sort of psychs himself up. I think he sees the other kids and he thinks, ‘Well I should be doing that’, but when he gets to the top, and the realization of going down, he just thinks, ‘No’, and he takes the thing off again. Em, but I don’t think there’s anything in particular that’s his favourite thing. He just generally runs around and plays on most things. (Julie, mother from affluent two-parent family with three children)

_Holly:_ I like going down the big scary slide.

_BoCP:_ What’s it like going down there?

_Holly:_ The first time I did it I forgot that I wasn’t . . . I forgot that it went ‘waaahhh’ like that, ‘cos it was the first time that I did it, and I banged my head when I got to the bottom.

_BoCP:_ Ahhh.

_Holly:_ So the next time that I did it I listened to the lady and went ‘woooohhhh’. I got scared. And then I went down and I was OK. (Heather, aged 6 from affluent two-parent family)

Furthermore, children are attracted to the ‘big slide’ with or without the encouragement of parents. This suggests that children are, at some level, decision-makers with respect to play in commercial playgrounds. Yet while parents, children and service providers concur on the value of the ‘big slide’, there are other aspects of the commercial playground on which opinions are divided. The role of play centre staff as ‘gatekeepers’ to the ‘big slide’ – a sensible strategy given the safety regulations that pertain to leisure environments and the increasingly litigious nature of society – is more generally atypical of their work. Play centre staff are often ‘trained’ (itself a marketable commodity), but are rarely trained to the level of a professional playworker (a marketable commodity that is more costly to support). Parents often perceive that play centre staff are inadequate, reflecting the fact that ‘safe play’ is a commodity to which particular value is accorded:

I sit there and I try and read a paper but I can’t relax because I’m aware of or feel there are dangers implicit in the equipment. And, I don’t have a great deal of confidence in the staff that I see there, who seem too young to possibly have the experience necessary and to be looking after my kids. I mean there’s no such things as good supervisors at the Fun Zone. (Heather’s father)
In contrast, non-interventionist staffing is highly valued by child consumers.

Emma: You get to throw the balls and not get told off like you do at Fun Stop right. You just started having a play fight and they said ‘Stop throwing the balls please.’ . . . And at FunZone they don’t even tell you off once.

BoCP: And do you think that’s good?

Emma: Yes, definitely. (Emma, aged 8 from poor two-parent family with five children)

More generally, many parents express concern over the commodification of play. Some object to the changing nature of play (Jimmy, below), others object to the financial cost and the practice of gleaning profit by using children’s play for commercial gain (Caroline, below), while others still object to their own marginalization and loss of control (Neal, below).

Society’s changed, hasn’t it? You’ve got lots of computer games. Kids, computers. Years ago there was nothing like that. So it was sport orientated. No football, from the boys’ point of view. You hardly see any kids playing football on the streets, girls skipping, there’s nothing like that anymore, because they’ve got too much, er, TV games, more than anything. And they’re quite willing to sit in all day and watch them, or play with their games, electronic games. (Jimmy, father from working-class family with three children)

There’s nothing at all that is free for children to do. Everything is down to money. And it’s not fair. It drives me mad. Everything seems to be profit making. How can you make money out of children’s play? I don’t know . . . I mean it just doesn’t seem fair really. (Caroline, lone mother with four children)

I think the public by and large are conned a lot with television adverts to buy their children happiness, you know what I mean. Plus it gets the kids out of their parents’ hair because they’ve got something to occupy themselves with. But at a price. And I think it’s wrong. There should be more emphasis upon teaching kids how to create their own fun. (Neal, father from working-class family with two children)

While many parents are concerned at the trend towards commodifying play, many (of the same) parents also find positive value in the commodification of playspace. Not all adults subscribe to a rosy nostalgia of yesteryear’s childhood; the array of dedicated leisure spaces of which children can now partake are considered to provide for a richer childhood (Colin and Sarah, below). Leaving aside the quality of play opportunities, the new commodified playspaces of childhood are valued by adults. Indeed for one parent, somewhat paradoxically, the commercial playground implies a more convivial homelife, as it prevents young children from ‘messing up’ the home by playing with their toys (see Jane, below)!

Mum: . . . we as parents have got more money than our parents had when we were little. So you’re able to take the children out more. I mean I don’t remember going to theme parks.

Dad: I wish I was a kid now. I’d have a field day. (Colin and Sarah from middle-class family with three children)

. . . they just trash the place, don’t they? Every toy comes out, and you just end
up with loads of work to do at the end of it. Perhaps in the old days when you
didn’t have so many toys then you wouldn’t have had these problems. (Julie,
mother from middle-class family with two children)

The commercial playground is commodified at different levels. Many par-
ents view commercial playgrounds as a cause of concern, yet recognize that
they fulfil a useful function in family life. Their very existence represents a
commodification of play, while within their boundaries safe play is valued
and opportunities are afforded to enhance esteem through play performance.
The ways in which commercial playgrounds are presented for consumers
and the way in which they are consumed are now considered.

**Selling playspace**

On the whole, parents object to the marketing of playspace to children.
While individual parents may hold different opinions on a particular facility,
the underlying attitude is that the more the facility is marketed to children,
the more distasteful the marketing. Thus, both Harold and John (below) are
more comfortable with facilities which are provided primarily for adults and
which recognize that adults have children (and that, therefore, these are chil-
dren for which the facility must also cater) than they are with facilities that
are provided primarily for children. In the former, the preference is for a
family restaurant over Lenny Lions, while in the latter the preference is for
Lenny Lions over FunZone. That play opportunities are afforded to children
is not the key issue; these parents are more concerned with accessing a
leisure environment which attends to their own needs and with avoiding
facilities that are marketed to children.

...if you go back to a family restaurant where they’ve thought about the fact
that it’s about adults, but adults have got children so they’ve accommodated in a
kind of decent way. They’re not trying to make money out of the kids. They
will...you get the feeling they will make their money out of the adult market.
They’re not selling it to kids, in the way that Lenny Lions clearly is. It’s quite
different. (Harold, father from middle-class family with one child)

And also Lenny Lions, because I don’t feel that that is exploitative in a way.
No, I mean it obviously is because it’s a commercial undertaking...but [when]
we’re going to a pub, (having) a meal is the primary objective. [W]e’re going
somewhere where we can do that and [there is] something for the kids to enjoy.
Whereas when you go to FunZone you know, the prime aim is to go there for
them, really. And so I’m not so unhappy about places attached to pubs as I am
about completely free-standing places that advertise themselves as ‘Here’s
somewhere to come and you’re kids can go berserk while you sit down and
relax.’ (John, father from middle-class family with two children)

Further thoughts of John highlight that it is not marketing per se that is
found so objectionable. Rather, it is quality of the commercial playground
that is the key concern and the inconsistency between the marketed mes-
gage and the product. Thus, the active, healthy play that is promoted in
commercial playgrounds must be balanced against the ‘unhealthy’ food options that are offered in attached cafes. There is scope, therefore, for improving the product and improving the marketed message.

No, but these Lenny Lions places, I think they’re almost sort of indispensable now, but we don’t use them that much. There are times when nothing else will do. . . . But one can’t help feeling, well . . . can’t help feeling that they’re incredibly exploitative as well, . . . whilst wanting to use them, or needing to use them. I suppose I just wish they were better . . . the truces that are being made are so clearly commercial, whereas I think, as Alison was saying, the kind of people that surely you’d think, the kind of people that are able to afford to take their kids there are the kind of people that surely would spend a bit more on sensible snacks and healthy food and decent drinks rather than drinks that have, you know, 50 million E-numbers down the side of it. So that’s what makes me feel, you know, perhaps exploitation’s putting it a bit too strongly, but that there are, that this is clearly a cynical commercial operation. It’s not an intelligent commercial operation. Because I think that an intelligent commercial operation could make more money by giving parents in our sort of income bracket or social aspiration or whatever it is, you know, the kind of things that we would think ‘Hey this is great’. (John, father from middle-class family with two children)

Harold would find much to object to within the promotional literature of commercial playgrounds. He would also perhaps object to attempts to establish brand loyalty through membership of children’s clubs, the themed play environment and food, incentive schemes with rewards based on participation, and the reminders in the run-up to the child’s next birthday that are received by parents whose children have previously used a commercial facility for a birthday party. However, not all fathers are so sceptical over the value of such ancillary products:

Yeah. I mean I think because that was the first place she went. And like, she had so much in there to sort of occupy her that it was a place that she linked into really well. And she knows, she feels quite secure at the Wacky Warehouse. And I’ve just got like letters off them, and gifts and things like sweat bands and baseball caps and socks and things like that, which makes her feel like a part of it all. (Michael, lone father with one child)

However, for the most part, parents’ awareness of commercial playgrounds is generated by word-of-mouth and interest is sustained thereafter through promotional literature. These leaflets have many common elements. They promote (play) values which are held by most parents and they appeal to environmental characteristics which are desired by parents; issues of safe play, relaxation for parents while children are at play, socially inclusive play and the provision of a space for controlled adventure are frequently promoted. The use of colour, the theming of environment and action shots of children at play are used to entice the child. The importance of these marketing elements should not be underestimated; for example, they are understood as being an integral part of children’s product preferences (see Margaret, below). Furthermore, children are receptive to these messages, but not
passively so. Children understand the differences between products (Stuart, below) and are sharply critical of those service providers who overstep the boundary between fantasy and reality in their promotional marketing (Colleen, below),

... I think they, you know toy producers, leisure people, you know, can make stuff which is so much more visually appealing now, that why would any child go for the boring looking stuff? You know, you know how kids love bright gaudy colours, don’t they? (Margaret, mother of five children, affluent family)

Mum: Oh, it’s not called Sammi’s Safari anymore, it’s called er, Kevin and Kate’s Coconut Island.
Stuart: It’s not mum, it’s called Kevin and Kate’s Island. (Stuart aged 7 and mother; lone-parent family with three children)

Colleen: . . . Sounded better than it was.
BoCP: Yeah? Where did you hear about it then?
Colleen: It was like brochures and . . . it sounds really great and everything and then you get there and you’re like . . .
BoCP: So what kind of things was it saying that made it sound really good in the brochures?
Colleen: All the names that they had for it and it’s it’s sort of like . . .
Rob: The way it describes it. . . . I think it exaggerated things.
Colleen: But not like unbelievably. Do you know what I mean? If it was like unbelievably exaggerated then you wouldn’t sort of go because you’d think ‘oh right, they’re exaggerating’. But it wasn’t like that. It was like, just made it sound good. (Colleen, aged 11 from middle-class family)

Children are receptive to the marketing tactics that are employed by entrepreneurs. In some instances they have even been brought into ‘brand’ play environments; one regional brewer, for example, held a competition among local school children with prizes being awarded to the ‘best’ name for the commercial playground. This is, however, generally the limit of children’s involvement in producing commercial playscapes.3

Consuming playspace

Exploration of children’s utilization of (consumption in) commercial playgrounds is beyond the remit of this article. Here, we are concerned with two issues: the process through which consumers respond to information on commercial playgrounds; and the decision-making process that leads to consumption. What circumstances lead to children visiting commercial playgrounds?

According to parents, children are relatively unimportant in alerting them to the existence of commercial playgrounds. Parents gleaned information about commercial playgrounds from a wide variety of sources, of which friends/family (37 percent), when driving/walking past (25 percent) and advertisements (18 percent) were the most important. Only one-eighth of parents acquired their knowledge about commercial playgrounds through
their son/daughter being invited to a birthday party, while fewer than one in 20 were first informed directly by their child and fewer still were informed after their child provided them with a promotional leaflet. Data on parents’ information field would seem to suggest that parents are in control of the conditions that precede the decision-making process.

The subsidiary role that children would appear to fulfil in raising their parents’ awareness of commercial playgrounds also seems characteristic of their involvement in visit decision-making. According to parents, only one-third of decisions to visit commercial playgrounds involve children as decision-makers; almost one-tenth of cases are a ‘joint-decision’ between adults and children, while just over one-quarter are child-led. These statistics, which suggest that visit decisions are mainly adult-led, lend little support to any of McNeal’s three positions of the child as market. Discussions with parents tend to reinforce these findings:

Julie: We don’t tend to do a lot to be honest. I tend to go up to FunZone quite a bit in the winter. On a Sunday. It depends really, how bad they are in terms of how much energy they’ve got to burn off.

BoCP: So if you went to FunZone, whose decision would it be to go?
Julie: Mine. It’s me that takes them. My husband watches his motor racing then. (Julie, mother from middle-class family with two children)

BoCP: Who is it in the family that instigates going to the park, or going to FunZone?
Dad: You would instigate going to somewhere like FunZone.
Mum: Yes, I normally do it on my own don’t I? In the week when you’re working. (Harold, father from middle-class family with one child)

BoCP: Who’s likely to suggest a visit to FunZone?
Joan: The children! Our opinion is they can do a lot of it elsewhere. I mean, we’ve got a fantastic garden. They’ve got a lot of equipment. We go to parks regularly, but they seem to really like it. It’s Mummy and Daddy’s opinion [that] it’s loud and it’s noisy and it’s horrendous. (Joan, mother from middle-class family with two children)

In the first instance (Julie), children are completely marginalized in the decision-making process. Visits are not for the express purpose of leisure for the children; they are as much to do with defusing children’s play in the home environment to provide the parents with a means to relax, that is, the parent left at home can partake of television and the parent who accompanies the children is no longer troubled by the active play of children in the home. Similar sentiments are expressed in the second case (Harold), in which children do not figure at all in the decision-making process. In an interesting turn of phrase, the mother describes herself as visiting FunZone ‘on her own’ to describe a visit with the children, but not in the company of her partner. However, in some families children feature in the visit decision-making process. In contrast to Harold, for Joan the homespace is an adequate and appropriate playspace for her children. The environment of a FunZone does
not appeal, but is tolerated when children have initiated a visit to this commercial playground.

On the one hand, to find children marginalized in the decision-making process – as most would appear to be – would not be unexpected. First, these commercial playgrounds necessitate the involvement of adults. For the most part, adults must be present and perform the role of a supervisor who is notionally responsible for their child at play; even when facilities operate a ‘crèche-like’ facility, the siting of the facility and the need for adults to register their child’s attendance mean that adults must at least accompany their child to the playground. Thus, participation for children implies a commitment from adults. Second, these commercial playgrounds can be expensive, particularly for families with several children and those with less disposable income. Finally, the age group which is targeted by these facilities (primarily 4–9 years old, but notionally 18 months to 12 years) are still at a stage in which adults make the majority of decisions which pertain to the lives, particularly those which concern out-of-home life. However, it would be hard to find fault with such decision-making were it not for the signs that it is shaped largely by parents’ expressed needs. With respect to decision-making, there are signs that the commercial playground is not as child-oriented as one would have expected.

Despite being primarily an adult-led process, it proves insightful to consider decision-making in greater detail. Surprisingly, the child’s participation in visit decision-making is not related to any of the key social and economic planes of division; ethnicity, gender, class, distance travelled, car ownership, or family work status are not associated with significant differences in decision-making. However, three factors do emerge as planes of division among children: significant differences are evident with respect to family type, family size and the type of commercial playground being visited. Thus, there is markedly more evidence of children as decision-makers outside the ‘traditional’ two-parent family. While only one-third of such children contribute to decision-making, almost one-half of those visiting with a lone parent and three-fifths – the majority – of those visiting with an estranged parent, are decision-makers (Table 1). Concerns are often voiced over the relatively poorer life chances of children living outside the two-parent family (Millar and Ford, 1998); here, however, is an example whereby children in such families are accorded relatively more responsibility over one aspect of their lives. At the very least, it is suggestive of different dynamics of family life between the ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ family. Children are also found to contribute more to decision-making when they have fewer siblings. Children contribute to decision-making in a mere one-quarter of families with three or more children, compared to one-third of families with two children and two-fifths of one-child families (Table 2). On one level this is counterintuitive, as it would have been reasonable to assume that children would be more likely to influence decision-making in families
with more children. That an inverse relationship is found for decision-making which leads to a visit tends to suggest that the cost of visiting a commercial playground is a significant disincentive for families with several children, or indeed perhaps that commercial playgrounds fulfil a useful function for facilitating social interaction for children without siblings. Finally, it is found that children’s participation in decision-making differed according to the genre of commercial playground. Fewer than one-third of children were involved in initiating the visit to a family pub, compared to two-fifths for an indoor stand-alone playground and almost three-fifths – a majority – for shops within retail outlets (Table 3). This finding is significant on two counts. First, it signals that children have a greater role to play when decision-making is more opportunistic. Thus, when visits require less premeditation (such as is required when a visit to a family pub is decided upon), then

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Children’s role in visit decision-making, by family type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family type</td>
<td>Did child contribute to decision-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-resident</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parent</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Significant at 99.5 percent confidence level with $\chi^2 = 11.73842$, at 2 d.f.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Children’s role in visit decision-making, by family size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in household</td>
<td>Did child contribute to decision-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Significant at 95 percent confidence level with $\chi^2 = 6.94193$, at 2 d.f.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Children’s role in visit decision-making, by type of commercial playground</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of playspace</td>
<td>Did child contribute to decision-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play centre</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family pub</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Significant at 99.9 percent confidence level with $\chi^2 = 43.89876$, at 2 d.f.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
children figure more prominently as decision-makers. In the retail store, children respond to market promotions and shape decision-making. Second, and more specifically, it tends to suggest that the opening-up of adult domains – such as the family pub – to children (McKendrick et al., 1999) is less all-encompassing than would first appear; the vast majority of decisions to visit a family pub are (still) initiated by adults.

There is a high degree of correlation between family type, family size and the genre of commercial playground in which the respondent was surveyed. Thus, lone-parent families tend to have fewer children (of those surveyed, 47 percent were one-child, 36 percent were two-child and 17 percent were three-or-more-child families, compared to 27 percent, 49 percent and 24 percent, respectively for two-parent families); family types were associated with particular commercial playgrounds (48 percent of two-parent families were surveyed in family pubs, 65 percent of estranged parents were surveyed in stand-alone playgrounds, while roughly equal proportions of lone-parent families were surveyed in shops, family pubs and stand-alone centres); and families with fewer children were more likely to be surveyed in shops and stand-alone centres, whereas families with more children were more likely to be surveyed in family pubs (e.g. 30 percent of one-child, 51 percent of two-child and 61 percent of three-or-more child families were surveyed in family pubs). These findings are of inherent value, although the significant point at this juncture is to recognize that the bivariate associations referred to previously must now be re-examined.

When controlling for the effect of family type, it is found that there remains evidence that family size is associated with children’s role as decision-makers, e.g. 50 percent of children without siblings in lone-parent families contribute to visit decision-making, compared to 27 percent of children in lone-parent families with one brother or sister. On the assumption that both family type and family size influence the type of commercial playground which families visit (and not the other way around), controlling for these ‘effects’ further confirms that visit decision-making is contingent on the type of commercial playground which the family are visiting. For all cohorts, more children contribute towards decision-making for shops than indoor play centres and, in turn, for indoor play centres than for family pubs, e.g. the proportions of children from lone-parent families who are contributing to visit decision-making in shops, indoor play centres and family pubs are as follows, 61 percent, 43 percent and 29 percent, respectively, while for families with three of more children the respective proportions of decision-makers are 53 percent, 36 percent and 16 percent.

While these statistics which explore parents’ accounts of the decision-making that preceded the visit on which they were surveyed yield useful insights into children’s role as consumers of commercial playspace, it must be recognized that family decision-making is not always a straightforward process:
Whose decision was it to go to Gulliver’s World?

Simon: I don’t know! What we quite often do is wake up, say right we’re gonna have a day out, get the local paper out, see what’s going on, and we just go through a list of ideas where to go, don’t we? I can’t remember, I think we were just throwing ideas around weren’t we? And we just came up with Gulliver’s World. (Simon, father from middle-class family with two children)

BoCP: Who is it in the family that suggests going to a pub or somewhere like that?

Paul: Them. Well they do a lot, don’t they?

Carla: Yeah I mean we might mention that we go out and they’ll just take it that, right, we going out and we’ll go to Lenny Lions. (Paul and Carla, working-class family with two children)

Thus, decision-making is also multi-stage in that the primary decision to ‘consume’ is often made by adults (‘we’re going out’), whereas the secondary decision to ‘consume’ a specific product is often made by children (‘we’ll go to Lenny Lions or Gulliver’s World’).

Conclusion: children as consumers

It has been asserted that the growth of commercial playgrounds in the UK is part of a broader process whereby ever greater realms of children’s lives are commodified. These leisure environments are marketed to adults and children, with a balance being struck between adult’s concerns for safe play and children’s desires for exciting play opportunities. However, a simple conclusion that these developments are testimony to the new-found consumer power of children would seem misplaced. Children play a marginal role in the decision-making process and a marginal role in contributing to parents’ information field prior to decision-making. Some groups of children are found to be more active consumers of these spaces; children with fewer siblings and children outside two-parent families being significantly more likely to contribute to decision-making. However, ‘active consumption’ is not distributed evenly across types of commercial playground. Of particular significance is that children are more marginal to the decision-making process for family pubs, the domains which have traditionally been the preserve of adults.

The finding that children of single and (especially) estranged parents are likely to emerge as more active decision-makers is particularly interesting. Not only does it question the simplistic conjuncture of two-parent/good, one-parent/bad, which characterizes many debates on children’s family life, but also it provides insight into its oft-overlooked geographical dimensions. Arguably, the spatial separation of children from estranged parents means that moments of spatial togetherness are going to be much more ‘child-centred’ and ‘child-sensitive’ occasions wherein children’s views take much more of a front seat.

How then do these findings inform our understanding of children as a
market? Returning to McNeal’s tripartite classification, it seems there is little evidence to support the contention that children are a primary market (as there is little opportunity for direct consumption given the precondition of adult sanction that is placed upon participation). Likewise, there is little evidence to support claims that they are a future market (given the discontinuity of provision between middle childhood and adulthood). There is also only a little evidence to suggest that children are either a direct influence market (in that they only contribute to a minority of decisions to purchase) or an indirect influence market (in that parents take account of children’s needs in determining their own). Commercial playgrounds are found wanting in shaping the child consumer of today and tomorrow. Arguably with respect to commercial playgrounds, children are not, per se, a market. It may be more realistic to argue that it is a family leisure composite that is being commodified, as opposed simply to children’s play. That is, commercial playgrounds are packaging a composite of children’s adventurous play for children, children’s safe play for adults and a ‘space’ in which parents can relax. What at first appears to be a space for children’s play is only this inasmuch as it is contingent upon a series of preconditions about the nature of play that is permitted.

Furthermore, to arrive at a fuller picture of the extent to which children are or are not shaping this new consumption landscape of commercial playgrounds, it is necessary to also consider whether they have a genuine input to ‘family’ decisions about visits to such spaces, times spent at such spaces and exactly what kind of play is allowed in such spaces. More specifically, it would be necessary to ask further questions about the extent to which children themselves are ‘consulted’ about the very design and running of these playgrounds. Anecdotal evidence suggests that children perform, at best, a marginal and secondary role as producers of these play environments; these findings further emphasize the marginality of children in what are purportedly children’s environments.

This may be of wider significance to debates on consumer society, and children and consumption. Children’s play is traditionally the domain over which children have exerted most control during their lives. The extension of ‘places for play’ (commercial playgrounds) has been welcomed as an extension of children’s right to space in parts of the built environment from which they had previously been excluded. While the symbolic landscape of these new domains for children’s play may still exude a positive public message for children as a social group, further analysis of the ‘hidden’ decision-making process that precedes participation suggests that the ‘right to space’ has been achieved at a cost. Far from attending to children as a market and the market-demand for children’s play, these playscapes are primarily being used to address the needs of parents. (Further) loss of control over their own play is a cost that children are bearing as they partake of the exciting new play opportunities which are presented to them by commercial playgrounds.
Notes

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1. Elsewhere, we have explored the significance of these developments with respect to: children’s ‘place’ in the urban environment, the cultural significance of children’s birthday parties, learning landscapes, social exclusion, family life, institutionalization and organized leisure space and disability issues. Please contact John McKendrick for more details.

2. Pseudonyms are used for interviewees and the commercial playgrounds to which they refer. BoCP refers to questions and commentary made by one of the authors.

3. Consideration of children’s role as designers of commercial playgrounds is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is little evidence to suggest that children are involved in playground design.

References


