

# Consumer education between 'consumership' and citizenship: experiences from studies of young people

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## Abstract

The aim of consumer education has been mainly to teach and educate students to act as informed, rational and prudent consumers. This perception of consumption as reasoned behaviour or action is inadequate in the late modern society, where consumerism is first and foremost characterized by globalization, cultural change and the liberation of the individual. The results of a research study involving Danish pupils aged 12–19 years present a picture of consumption connected both to material and non-material aspects of life. Consumption as such has a significant impact on and meaning for the individual: it becomes a means by which human beings communicate and interact. Consumption is part of children's and young people's education and socialization, and plays a role in the development of identity and self-image. Institutional consumer enlightenment and the education of students in school stand in contrast to informal consumer socialization and the education of individuals. The aim of formal consumer education may be described as 'educating for critical consumer awareness and action competence'. However consumer education finds itself in the dilemma between 'consumership' and 'citizenship'. This pilot study is aimed at understanding consumer socialization in order to improve formal consumer education and to reflect on how empowerment becomes part of consumer education.

**Keywords** Experiences and attitudes on consumption among pupils aged 12–19.

## Introduction

'The universal consumer' could be the title of a new song, replacing 'The universal soldier' because consum-

erism has become a global, universal and unifying movement. It is a movement and activity that has great significance for and impact on the lives of children and young people all over the world. It is not new, as Colin Campbell has documented in *The Romantic Ethic and Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, it was already developing during the Renaissance.<sup>1,2</sup> What is novel about it is the amount and number of consumer goods that are on offer in the late modern society and the rate at which they are changed, exchanged and thrown away and how fast new consumer items are developed. Another change is the power and potential children and young people have in relation to consumption, both directly as consumers themselves and indirectly by influencing parents' choices and consumption. This has been documented in a large Danish research study and in two European surveys.<sup>3–5</sup> According to the Danish survey young people in the age ranges 12–15 and 16–18 years have, on average, 300 and 400 Euros monthly respectively for consumption and saving, acquired through pocket money, gifts and personal earnings. It can be seen that these young people possess great potential for spending. Jens Carsten Nielsen argues in the Danish survey that at the age of 11–12 years young people have finally moved into the adult world and their spending patterns resemble those of adults. With regard to consumption and the use of media, childhood only exists up till the age of 7 years, so children of 8–10 years are in a transition phase.<sup>6</sup> It might be debatable whether children's ways of consuming resemble parents, as they do not have the responsibilities of running the household and taking care of the needs of the whole family. Historical changes have also diminished the need for children and young people to be active members of the household. In certain social groups this has always been the case, but for the majority of households in earlier times, children were positive contributors to production. Now they have become positive contributors to consumption, as can be seen in advertisements and shops.

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Young people's power and potential for consumption have, as the Danish sociologist Henrik Dahl expressed it at a consumer conference, aroused the whole 'industry of concern'.<sup>7</sup> 'The industry of concern' is the established consumer information society, the Consumer Board and Council, and the education sector, all claiming a need for action and further consumer education, whereas Dahl sees no reason for concern. He finds children prudent and capable, and finds, that 'we as parents and educators have always been concerned'. As someone involved in consumer education and research one may be provoked by Dahl's description, but one may also turn it round and become eager to understand and to research the phenomena involved in the informal consumer education of children and young people, in order to develop and change formal consumer education.<sup>8,9</sup> This is the overall aim of a research study entitled 'Consumer Education in school, home and society', which is part of a larger Nordic co-operation. It is furthermore the intention to define, explain and understand consumer culture related to specific age groups and to the household's context, especially since there has been less focus on informal consumer education, the more non-material aspects of consuming and the significance this may have for consumer education. Finally, the goal has been to test different qualitative methods described below to get an introductory picture, followed by a larger survey and developmental work within school. In the following, preliminary results of part of the introductory research are presented. This article deals with the study of children's and young people's experiences and views on consumption.

### Research study – methods and materials

The selected age groups are: 12–13, 15–16 and 18–19 years old. In Grade 6, aged 12–13 the pupils are

small-scale consumers, as, at this age, they are not allowed to work to any great extent and are thus financially dependant on parents and family. Youths in the age group 15–16 may have paid work, and are in the beginning of independence, whereas those in age group 18–19 are independent in many respects. All students over 18 receive a study grant, regardless of their financial state and living conditions; many of them still live with, and are dependent on their parents.

The pilot study has been carried out in four classes spanning three age groups as seen in Table 1.

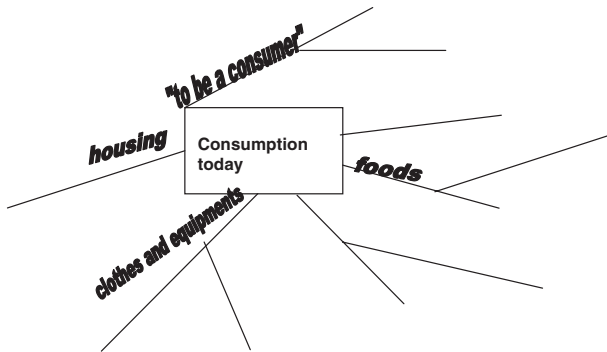
The study has been carried out in the following steps:

- 1 contact with schools and teachers, information on the project;
- 2 classroom setting:
  - futuristic consumer scenarios read to the pupils – elaborated if needed;
  - presentation of mind maps of consumption today and in the future, students fill in the mind maps individually; and
  - small-scale questionnaires concerning the pupil (not included here);
- 3 interviews of selected individuals of both genders; and
- 4 analysis of methods and data.

The classes were contacted through established contacts with teachers in Copenhagen and the surrounding areas. They were chosen because of their different demographics. The researcher spent two periods in each of the schools giving an introduction using scenarios on the development of the consumer society. The scenarios chosen were taken from a report on future consumption and were presented under the headlines: The Computer Dream – Efficient Consumption, Home Again – Modest Consumption, Free Initiative – Unhindered Consumption.<sup>10</sup> Already some aspects of the present have caught

**Table 1** Classes in the pilot study

Classes/grade	Age (years)	Schools – neighbourhood	No. of pupils
6th	12–13	Copenhagen SW, mostly flats, deprived area	12
6th	12–13	North Zealand, middle class, own villas and flats	21
9th	15–16	Suburb, West of Copenhagen, mixed area, flats and villas	11
Final year of upper secondary school	18–19	Suburb North of Copenhagen, affluent area, flats and villas	20



**Figure 1** Mind map layout for consumption today (Benn, 2000).

up with the future described in these scenarios. Nevertheless, they contain a lot of relevant viewpoints on consumption, including dichotomies, which must be considered both for today and the future.

The mind maps were pre-printed, as can be seen in Fig. 1. One page was made for the present and another for the future. Four categories were fixed and chosen by the researcher, as can be seen in the figure. These were: ‘to be a consumer’, consumption of foods, housing, clothes and equipment. In addition to these issues, it was stressed, that all kinds of considerations and valuations on consumption could be mentioned, there were ‘no right answers’.

Concerning the methods, it is obvious that mind maps and interviews reveal only part of consumption that can be verbalized, described and made explicit, whereas the tacit knowledge, or as Elliott calls it, the unconscious level, is difficult to catch through this methodology.<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned that there are different aspects to what cannot be verbalized, the tacit may be tacit because there is no language available to speak of these sorts of items or it may be tacit because you are unconscious of it. Another part of the non-written (or spoken) consumer perspective may be revealed in the interview if the interviewer picks up on something the respondent says; nevertheless, some part of consumption and consumer behaviour and acting will be tacit at all times.

**Preliminary results – consumption on my mind**

The introductory and preliminary results show that sce-

narios and mind maps are a way of gaining knowledge of pupils’ experiences, conceptions and concepts concerning consumption or some part of this. On the other hand, they also show that they have to be followed up, reinforced and explored through interviews and perhaps also a small questionnaire concerning the pupils’ life situation now and their ideas about a future household and family. In-depth interviews with two people of both genders have been carried out in each class afterwards.

In general, the pupils of all age groups express expectations that:

- Further increase in consumption will be possible on a small or large scale and if not, it will be because they will have a bigger household (children).
- Resource and environmental problems can be managed through technological development, aid and solutions.

For the young people aged 18–19 at the upper secondary school, to be a consumer today means happiness and consciousness, and freedom and pressure, as shown in Table 2. The other age groups have the same perceptions and considerations to a certain degree.

It turned out that food and drink was mostly decided on and purchased by parents albeit influenced by their children. The pupils in all age groups had consumed fast foods, soft drinks and sweets they bought themselves. The boys generally did not bother about the sort and amount they consumed, whereas the girls gave more consideration to the issue. Clothes and

**Table 2** ‘To be a consumer today’ from the mind maps of the upper secondary school (*n* = 20)

To be a consumer today involves	
Positive aspects	Difficult aspects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being ‘a happy consumer’</li> <li>• Pleasure</li> <li>• ‘Buying when bored’</li> <li>• Consumption larger than needs</li> <li>• ‘Ruled by majority’</li> <li>• ‘No end of choices’</li> <li>• ‘We are spoilt’</li> <li>• Identity created by society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power and consciousness</li> <li>• Pressure towards political consumption</li> <li>• Criticism about purchasing</li> <li>• Environmental consciousness</li> <li>• Quality is important</li> </ul>

**Table 3** 'To be a consumer in future', from the mind maps of the upper secondary school ( $n = 20$ )

To be a consumer in future deals with	
Positive aspects	Difficult aspects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same ideas about being a consumer as today</li> <li>• Technology will have a great impact</li> <li>• Intensification of marketing</li> <li>• Easier consumption made possible by technology</li> <li>• Consumption demands a large labour effort and big earnings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing number of political consumers</li> <li>• Consideration, consciousness and power</li> <li>• Independent choice (have own households and families in the future)</li> <li>• Conscious of consumption (because of own children)</li> <li>• Recycling (only one person)</li> <li>• Ecology</li> </ul>

equipment give rise to quite different considerations and thoughts. Today, one group of pupils aged 16–19 buy on impulse whereas others know exactly what brand and type they want to buy and stick to it, until the next trend takes over. It should be pointed out that the oldest group was living in a very affluent part of Denmark.

Mind maps of consumption in the future forward the following key aspects as seen in Table 3.

The future mind maps dealing with food and drink revealed a growing financial, economical and ecological awareness: 'it (food) will be more important in the future' and 'food must be pure and taste good.' At the same time, some pupils suggested that more ready-made foods and convenience foods would take over. Concerning clothes and equipment, some young people realized the possibility of a decrease in spending caused by responsibility for a whole family. A striking point was their confidence that technology would take care of future problems concerning consumption, and the possibility of consuming without restrictions if the finances were available.

### Dilemmas and dialectics concerning consumption – discussion of results

Some dialectics show up on the mind maps as well as in the interviews. Richard Elliott describes the dialectics

in his article: *Existential Consumption and Irrational Desire*. They may also be called polar tensions in the consumption areas, but it is not a question of one pole or the other, it can be both and may also be seen as a continuum.<sup>11</sup>

The 'Elliott' dialectics are:

- 1 the material vs. the symbolic;
- 2 the social vs. the self;
- 3 desire vs. satisfaction;
- 4 rationality vs. irrationality; and
- 5 creativity vs. constraint (adaptation).

A sixth dialectic may be added:

- 6 pleasure/hedonism vs. asceticism/frustration.

Statements from the interviews and mind maps illustrate the dialectics as mentioned above.

#### The material vs. the symbolic

'I can change myself as easy as I change my clothes', Taylor and Saarinen say.<sup>12</sup> One boy aged 15 in grade 9, was fully aware of that possibility, how to choose and shape an identity. 'I am a skater . . . as you see, so I just go for that sort of stuff'. The boy wears skater cloths and sees himself as such, but when asked if he skates, he says no, although he justifies the clothing: 'it is very comfortable . . .' Both material and non-material arguments are brought forward. Today we are independent individuals with the possibility to choose what we want to be. We are, as Ziehe and Stubenrauch observe, liberated from old cultural norms and values, which puts a pressure on the individual to choose who to be: the choice may not be the same on Monday as on Sunday, or in school and in leisure time.<sup>13</sup>

#### The social vs. the self

'I only need the basic essentials in my flat', one male interviewee, aged 19 said in the interview and his mind map indicated that his future consumption dealt only with the need for the most elementary goods. He expressed a social and global concern, at the same time, as he was aware that 'goods are both to think with and to speak with', as expressed by Fiske.<sup>14</sup> He demonstrates this in the interview, stating that: 'A living place

must have a proper address and some luxury designer furniture!’

Through clothes, foods, place of residence and surroundings people express who they are, and to which part of society they belong. But the inequality in the world and in his own world was ingrained in this boy’s mind. The social self needs only the most necessary basic goods and foods, but the ego, or egocentric self needs more. It might also be expressed as the dilemma and dialectic between being eco-centred and egocentric, which are the terms used by the Canadian home economist Eleanore Vaines in her work on philosophical orientations within home economics.<sup>15</sup> An eco-centred person cares for people and surroundings whereas the egocentric only considers their own needs.

#### Desire vs. satisfaction

The goal of consumption might on the one hand be seen as satisfaction and on the other as dissatisfaction, which leads to new demands, as one of the girls aged 18 expressed:

My biggest wish is a Gucci handbag! My last best buy was a Cerruti 1881 handbag.

Consumption or consumerism does not aim at, want or desire satisfaction or if it does, it is for only a short time, exploited by the fashion companies. Specific brands in particular were of very high value for these young people. The consumption of accessories was furthermore a very gender-oriented part of consumption. ‘I think it means more to girls to buy all that small stuff like accessories’. Their buys highlight another point of consumption, the difference between the meaning of action and the meaning of objects.<sup>16</sup>

The boys did also have desires or wishes like boats, bikes, special cars or sports equipment whereas the girls’ desires were more related to the personal level of their own fashion style and image in their present situation.

#### Rationality vs. irrationality

In the evenings when I cook for myself, I care about buying organic, quality foods . . . , but I am not very

critical in my choice at lunch time, I just choose what I want to. (Boy, aged 18)

In one situation you may be the rational, critical consumer, acting consciously and considerately, whereas in another situation and setting you act irrationally. In the middle of the day, the informant just follows his senses, whereas in the evening he examines the labels and chooses between alternatives on the basis of his rational thinking about food. There may be no connection between what the consumer chooses in one setting and in another. Yet the situation might be turned upside down: it may be concluded that it is rational to pick the easiest fast food you can get your hands on in the school setting and use time to select and cook at home. Rationality vs. irrationality is both a question of thinking and sensing and of context and connection.

#### Creativity vs. constraint (adaptation)

I dress as I like – although fashion has to be followed to a certain degree. (Girl, aged 12)

To be creative, to do what one wants or to adapt to norms or rules, formal or informal, is another dialectic in the consumption pattern. Constraints from the immediate environment, the fashion industry, the group or others can be observed in the classes, interviews and also on the mind maps. Adaptation can be expressed especially through commodities like clothes, equipment, and mobile phones.

Creativity may be practised by a few of the respondents, expressed in ways such as ‘you do not need to follow the fashion’. Yet in order to keep up with the peer groups, creativity was also shown in the way some girls with limited resources obtain the wanted goods by buying second hand, or on special offers, or by making their own clothes. A 12-year-old boy showed another sort of creativity or coping strategy, as he recounted about clothes.

My mother buys most of my clothes, but I don’t always like them!

Interviewer: ‘What do you do then?’

Oh, I just throw them in the back of my wardrobe. I don't wear them!

A variety of coping strategies are demonstrated in line with the old thesis 'to keep up with the Joneses' or with others in the social settings.

#### Pleasure/hedonism vs. asceticism/frustration

I feel pleasure when I buy handbags. But I can do without them! (Girl, aged 19)

Pleasure related to buying and obtaining commodities plays a major role in consumer experiences and feelings about consumption. *I feel pleasure when, but I do not really need.* On most of the mind maps pleasure was mentioned in relation to being a consumer. Asceticism, on the other hand, is part of our Christian heritage but does not emerge very clearly from this study. It may be said in a 'low voice' like 'I can do without. . .' or in relation to food behaviour, especially when girls express that after enjoying sweets, or other unhealthy foods, they skipped the next meal.

This dilemma can be expressed as the aesthetic or sensual element in opposition to the ethical. It may also be seen as the battleground between formal consumer education, which stresses ethical behaviour, and informal consumer cultivation through media and markets trying to sell pleasure through consumer goods. A central theme in asceticism is perhaps the need for 'doing without' for different reasons. Formal education has had, and to a certain degree still has this moral perspective, aimed at concerns for health or the environment or other human beings and forgets to deal with the more aesthetic part of consumption.

#### Further discussion

As the child learns to shop, it also learns to be a particular sort of child. The child is a social construct. To the extent that they exist, histories of childhood indicate that the 'nature' of childhood, the relationship of children to each other and to adults, to the family, and to other social institutions such as work

and school, have changed across time and place. (Kenway and Bullen argue)<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, many other researchers – as mentioned earlier – have argued that childhood has diminished or almost disappeared at the same speed as the consumer society has developed. Childhood has, in the last 100 years, within the Western societies been seen as the part of life where children can develop and mature through socialization and education at home and in school. The 20th century was 'the century of the child', the pedagogical philosopher Ellen Key claimed around the year 1900.<sup>18</sup> What should we call the 21st century? The century of, or for consumers, or of young people, or the young consumer's society?

Consumption as a sort of employment can be seen as the descendent of the children's work in Western societies, which in Denmark was legislated around 1900. For many teenagers today, consumption requires a lot of work, but it seems to be an essential part of life to gain access to the consumer world or *The World of Goods*, as described by Douglas and Isherwood.<sup>19</sup> 'Consumption decisions become the vital source of the culture of the moment. People who are reared in a particular culture see it change in their lifetime: new words, new ideas, new ways. It evolves and they play a part in the change. Consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape,' (p. 37). People play a significant role and their decisions are vital for culture. These decision-makers are also young people to a larger extent than before in history. In the work of Douglas and Isherwood in 1979, consumers are seen as households, families and adults. This consumer picture has indeed changed, which is part of the explanation of the interest in children as consumers, from both commercial and educational points of view.

Consumerism is part of culture both as symbolic or non-material and concrete or material. Commodities have existed in people's lives since near the beginning of human history, helping people to manage their lives. New commodities pose a threat to the old culture and there exist goods for which we do not see the need, but who is going to define necessity? We are consumers of foods, commodities and services. For consumers, both the material and the non-material part of consumption make sense, varying between people and on the type of

consumption. In recent decades, many new consumer goods have become part of children and young people's lives: mobile phones, PCs, walkmans, etc. These sorts of consumer goods are, together with clothes for example, related to what we may call the pleasure, society as experienced by the pupils, whereas consumption of food is much more closely related to the risk society, although food also gives pleasure.<sup>20,21</sup> The risks of becoming too fat or becoming ill from foods is present in the consumption of food at the same time as the food may give rise to pleasure and hedonism. These dilemmas put a greater pressure on the individual now than they did previously. The individual must reflect on why, how and what to decide: 'everything is set for discussion', as Giddens puts it. This individualistic approach offers possibilities and difficulties.<sup>13,20,21</sup>

'The consumer is far from being a passive victim but is an active agent in the constructing of meaning', Elliott writes in the first part of his article on the dialectics in consumption.<sup>11</sup> The young people of this pilot survey agree with him, as seen in the study. Another Danish study by Birgitte Tufte based on interviews reveals this.<sup>22</sup> She sees the child as a competent consumer. What, then, is the problem concerning consumption today and tomorrow? One problem may be concern for the resources and the environment and another inequality in the world in relation to the possibilities of being a consumer. The oldest group within the survey, the class from the upper secondary school, had just been working on environmental problems and problems concerning developing countries compared with the Western industrialised world. This was hardly evident in their minds maps and in the interviews. This demonstrates a normal problem with regard to schooling – what is going on within the school is one thing, real life is something else: a sort of parallelism exists. School knowledge is synthetic, whereas learning outside school in the real world is a concrete part of their life-world as far as consumption is concerned. The school aims at citizenship and action competence but the pupils do not seem to bother outside the school.

The shifting life periods do also have a meaning for the consumption patterns of people. On the future mind maps a change could be seen from being the young thoughtless consumer – although family member – to becoming a parent or the person responsible for a

household might change views and actions. How much consumer education means for these future actions we do not know for sure, but it will surely depend on how this education is carried out.

### Conclusion and implications

Schooling, and consumer education or consumer information in the younger age groups must take into consideration the consumer life of pupils outside the school and all aspects of consumption; the dialectics involved in consumption show why.<sup>23</sup> The perspectives of being 'eco-centred' and egocentric must be included. These expressions, which are used and explained by Eleanor Vaines as philosophical orientations for home economics teachers, can be helpful in developing consumer education.<sup>15</sup> An eco-centred person shows care and concern both for him- or herself, for the family and others plus the environment, whereas the egocentric person is focused on fulfilling his or her own needs without any concern for the consequences. As with all models these ideal types or persons are not *either or* but rather *both and* as consumption is related to context and age or time, place and social environment as the ethnologists explain.

To be eco-centred requires competency to act. This concept was developed by researchers at the Danish University of Education and is quite closely connected to empowerment and citizenship as described by Tones, Tilford and McGregor.<sup>24–28</sup> Action competence requires, as Bruun Jensen describes:

- insight;
- engagement;
- visions; and
- acting experiences.<sup>24</sup>

It means that teachers in consumer education have to offer these opportunities for their students. Furthermore, action competence demands knowledge of, caution, strategies, effects and alternatives. The concept of action competence offers an educational ideal, or some visions for consumer education especially the part related to citizenship; but the 'consumership', which may be seen as the personal, expressive and aesthetic part has to be taken into consideration as well. This is a challenge for future consumer education.<sup>29</sup>

This research study is still in an introductory phase. The methods are to be developed further and mind maps and interviews may be supplemented with a questionnaire. As the analysis of the mind maps and interviews is still at the introductory level, the results must be seen as pre-preliminary results. Taking this into account, the work done up till now raises possibilities for further research 'into the mind of the consumer' and the understanding of consumption as part of identity and meaning for young people. It may be necessary to make a point of departure in the real consumer life in the consumer jungle and make the starting point for consumer educators there.

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