2010-1

# Consuming at the Centre of No-where: Tweens and the Mediating of Liminal Selves through Metaconsumption

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Recommended Citation

2010-01-01

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## *Introduction*

Despite the fact that 'a consumer culture of childhood stands as a ubiquitous fixture in public life' (Cook, 2004a: p1), there are few theoretical accounts of young people's specific negotiations and 'styles of agency' (James and Prout, 1996: p47) as they mediate the intricacies of their lived experiences and social contexts within contemporary consumer culture. Within the realm of children's consumer culture theorists, Martens et al (2004: p161) contend that 'relatively little is known about how children engage in practices of consumption or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives and broader issues of social organisation.'

This paper aims to respond to the call for theoretical and empirical insight into the lived experiences of young people as they mediate the shifting milieus of their social lives specifically through engagement with a myriad consumption practices. Focusing on the tween, we aim to theorise not only in relation to children's own experiences with consumption, but also to engage with the consumption practices of tweens conceptualised as those in the interstices of socio-cultural organisation; those who are liminal (e.g. Turner, 1967). Firstly we will briefly outline the articulated trajectory which has led to an overemphasis on the 'production of consumption' approach (Martens et al, 2004) in relation to children's consumption experiences at the expense of empirical insight. This includes consideration of the 'dogma of developmentalism' (Qvortrup, 2004) and its expansive integration via socialisation theory, and the sacred/empowered dichotomy of conceptualisation. The 'doing childhood' perspective as a possible alternative to the being/becoming debate is then presented and located firmly within the context of this research.

This is followed by a consideration of the theoretical framework of liminality and the consumption practices of those who are fundamentally betwixt and between two 'instances of completeness' (Cook, 2005: p4), highlighting its utility as a theoretical lens of inquiry in this context. Empirical outcomes of one aspect of this longitudinal research project – the theory of metaconsumption - are presented, suggesting a divergent theoretical path from the 'effects' dominated consumer socialization approach to researching young people and their

relationships with consumption. This theoretical understanding of liminal consumption aims to encapsulate the consumption practices of these social neophytes when 'relatively stable points of cultural and social interface begin to shift' (Russell and Tyler, 2005: p225).

## *Muted Voices and the Dogma of Developmentalism*

Qvortrup (1994) contends that the silencing of children's voices represents an acute marginalisation of children within sociological research and significantly attributes this marginality to a construction of subordination within theoretical conceptualisations of children and childhood itself. The most widely accepted view amongst contemporary sociologists is that this subordinate theoretical positioning has its origins in the paradigm which has dominated the sociology of children for decades; developmentalism. Disseminated widely by the work of Piaget (e.g. 1955), the child is envisaged as an incomplete work in progress, evolving along a trajectory of cognitive capacity to a point of adult competence.

Within the sociology of childhood, these paradigmatic specificities became manifest in the form of socialisation theory (e.g. Coley, 1998; Harris, 1995; Maccoby, 1992). In part due to its suggestion of the potential to influence or intervene at various stages of development (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Mills, 2000) the theory of socialisation has been applied to consumer research of children via a myriad of studies and theoretical advancements (John, 1999). John (1999) presents the most comprehensive and thorough delineation of literature and theoretical developments in the consumer socialization of children, providing structure and summary to an increasingly expansive area of research. The recognition of brand names and advertising (e.g. Hogg et al, 1998; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Chaplin & John, 2005; Lawlor & Prothero, 2003; Oates et al,2002; and Martin & Gentry, 1997), and the influence of particular 'socialisation agents' on children's growth as consumers (e.g. Moschis, 1985; Dotson & Hyatt, 2000; Ekstrom, 2007; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Grant & Stephen, 2005) represent the core focus of research in this area.

## *Beyond the either/or[1]….the children's culture industry debate*

A stifling dichotomy or polarisation is thought to permeate theorisations and research of child consumption practices. Rather than facilitate a development of knowledge and insight into the spheres of interaction between children and their consumption meanings, this either/or construction has fixated entire bodies of the academic community to the point of staticism.

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[1] The title of this section is taken from Cook, Daniel. (2004b) 'Beyond either/or'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. Vol 4 (2)

Fundamentally the 'dichotomous child' (Cook, 2005) mirrors a broader debate on structure versus agency (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003), where the child is envisaged as sacred and in need of protection from capitalist ingenuity or 'creative in their appropriation of consumer goods and media' (Seiter, 1993: p9-10).

Cook (2004a; 2004b, 2005) is one of the most vocal proponents of a research agenda diverted from a focus on the dual perspectives of the child consumer. Cook (2004) warns that unless scholars step outside of this all encompassing and yet concurrently futile dispute, child consumer culture will remain a marginal area of research. In a similar direction Langer (2005) contends that consumer culture research focused on the child needs 'an alternative to the either-or positions of uncritical celebration/puritanical condemnation of children's consumer pleasures (Langer, 2005; p269), if the body of research in this area is to progress. 'Debate about whether or not children are active or passive is…a distraction from more important questions about the social and cultural structures in which their active choices are made' (Langer, 2005: p263). Langer's (2005) criticism of the dichotomous orientation of research on the child consumer is therefore founded on recognition of the importance of the social context and cultural structure in which this interaction between child and consumption practices takes place.

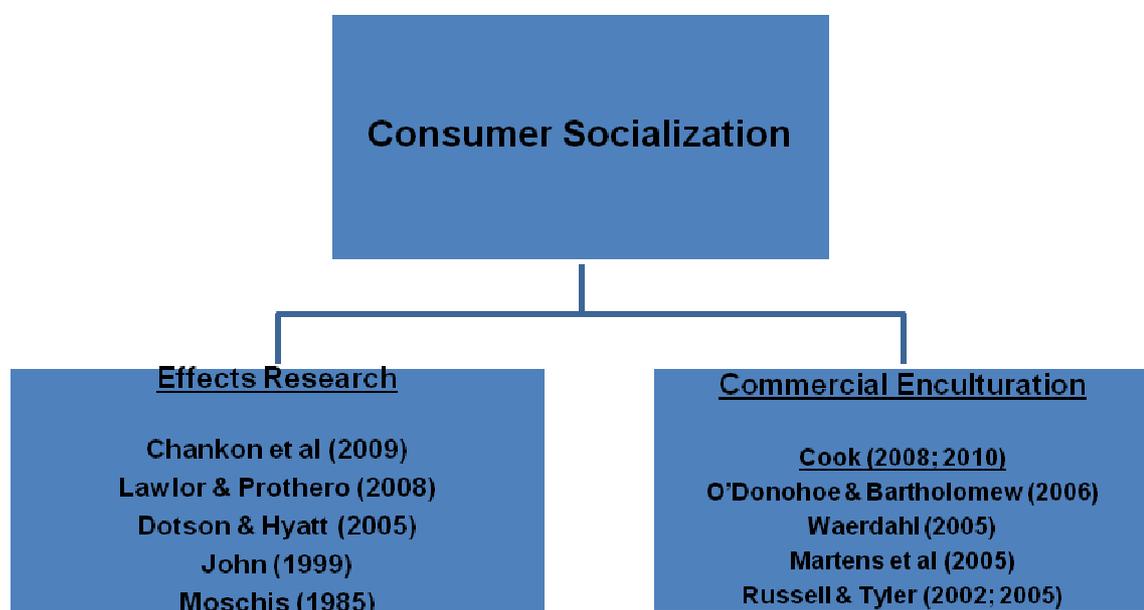### *A way forward – the 'doing' childhood perspective*

An attempt at resolving these fundamental issues is proffered by the 'doing' childhood perspective. Essentially this epistemological standpoint acknowledges that one cannot entirely negate the structural influences on a child's lived experience by positing children as fully agentive beings, however concurrently portraying children as inconsequential becomings is equally problematic. Thus the perspective of 'doing childhood' which 'seeks to privilege children's knowledge of the world they inhabit while also emphasizing the need, as in the case of adult "doing" to place that existence within its broader social context (Russell and Tyler, 2005: p227) has emerged as a welcome epistemological evolution.

Despite the noticeable dearth of research empirically and theoretically engaging with the specificities of children's own mediations with social context, structural environments, identity and consumption aside from 'effects research' and deliberations of dichotomies, there have been several seminal papers igniting an interest and readjusting the lens of analysis in this area. Studies with contextual specificities such as consumption and social age identities (Waerdahl, 2005), gender, consumption and identity (Russell and Tyler, 2002;

2005), the interweaving of commercial media and children's life worlds (Griffin et al, 2005), the consumption experiences of children deemed to represent those living in poverty (Elliot & Leonard, 2004), and children's management of existential worries through consumption of products, media and advertising (O'Donohue and Bartholomew, 2006) highlight the fruitful insights obtained when research engages with young consumers as 'inextricably entwined with consumer culture' (Buckingham, 2000: p166). 'Such attempts to justify children as embodied and constructive and as considered in the occupation of a world of their own making are important empirical contributions' (Jenks, 2005: p12).

In other words, as represented in figure 1, children's evolving relationships with consumption have been predominantly conceptualized under the mantle of 'effects research'. However burgeoning research within children's consumer culture studies have begun an attempt to embrace an alternative perspective on young peoples' interactions and relationships with consumption practices.

One potential conceptualisation of this divergent path is Cook's (2008) concept of 'commercial enculturation' attempts to capture the 'variety of ways children come to know and participate in commercial life' (Cook, 2008: p9) by shifting the focus to 'how consumption and meaning, and thus culture, cannot be separated from each other but arise together through social contexts and processes of parenting and socializing with others.' (Cook, 2008: p9). Thus commercial enculturation espouses the notion that a more insightful perspective can be gained by viewing children as not so much socialized into becoming one kind of specific consumer as they are seen entering into social relationships with and through goods and their associations.

## Consumer Socialization

### Effects Research

Chankon et al (2009)
Lawlor & Prothero (2008)
Dotson & Hyatt (2005)
John (1999)
Moschis (1985)

### Commercial Enculturation

Cook (2008; 2010)
O'Donohoe & Bartholomew (2006)
Waerdahl (2005)
Martens et al (2005)
Russell & Tyler (2002; 2005)

Using the theoretical framework of liminality as a lens through which to align with this epistemological evolution within children's consumer culture research requires a brief delineation of its core ideologies as they pertain to the empirical task at hand.

*The Centre of No-Where – The Theoretical Framework of Liminality*

It is primarily the work of Victor Turner (e.g. 1967; 1969) which explores the liminal space existing midway between two identifiable states. Defined by Turner & Turner (1978, p249) as 'the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage', a 'moment in and out of time' (Turner, 1969, p96), the liminal phase of a transition, represents an instance of incompleteness, when the liminars (the ritual subjects in this phase) 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner, 1969, p95). In other words the liminar is understood as experiencing a suspension of identities in which commitment to the fixed and definable social categories from which they left and towards which they gravitate cannot be made.

Delineating the attributes of liminal entities serves to illustrate the core ideologies of the theory. One such attribute is structural and social invisibility, seclusion from the spheres of everyday life (Turner, 1967). In addition, ideologies of liminal theory espouse characteristics such as symbolisation of concurrent degeneration and gestation or parturition (Turner, 1967), heteronomy, tabula rasa silence, equality and obscurity. The symbolisation of individuals reasoned liminal as well as the liminal phase itself highlights the central premise of Turner's theorisations. Those residing in this 'fruitful darkness' (Turner, 1967: p110), in the gaps between what is grouped and typified are simultaneously nothing and everything.

Turner's (1967, p110) 'invitation to investigators of culture to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition' has resulted in contrasting disciplines welcoming liminality and its constituent dimensions into their midst to enrich an understanding and analysis of many instances of interim socio-cultural positioning. Place and space (e.g. Pritchard and Morgan, 2006), performance (e.g. Dunne, 2002; Rill, 2006) technology and personhood (e.g. Anderson, 2003; Campbell et al, 2005, Waskul, 2005), and illness and loss (e.g. Little et al, 1998; Jones et al, 2007), are some of the contextual specificities in which ideologies of the liminal have been applied, theorised and brought to realization amidst socio-cultural ambiguity and suspended identities.

It is proposed that theorisations of young consumers' relations and meaning systems with consumer culture in the context of their shifting and suspended identities at this nexus of socio-cultural organisation and understanding are given theoretical rigour and a fruitful inter-disciplinary dimension by viewing these social neophytes through the lens of those who are no longer, but concurrently not yet.

The journey to threshold voices, enacting this transition from theoretical frameworks and empirical dearth to emergent data and subsequent theorisations in relation to liminal consumption, are now presented through a brief overview of method.

*Research Procedures*

Cognisant of the fundamental objectives or purpose of this work – to explore tweens' engagement with consumption practices in the context of the shifting identities and socio-cultural organisation of their liminal existence – several key methodological decisions were taken. First, in relation to sample, two underlying premises enabled the setting of sample parameters. In terms of what specific age group the 'tween' should constitute or represent, chronological conceptualisations of the tween derived from marketing discourse were consulted (e.g. Lindstrom, 2004; Siegal et al, 2004). Overriding consensus outlined the tween segment as young consumers between 8 and 12. It was decided that mindful of the inherent ideologies of liminality, a time period deemed fundamentally disruptive or ambiguous in the life of the pre-adolescent was needed in order to capture the lived experience of 'betwixt and between' at its most vivid. Thus a longitudinal study of a year was carried out amongst 15 tween girls aged between 11-12, who were undergoing the transition from primary to secondary school. In addition, the participants were of homogenous gender. For the most part when discussing or theorising on the subject of tweens, females are the focus of analysis (Cook, 2004b; 2004c; Lindstrom, 2003a/b). Cognisant of the potential variance in lived experiences of liminality for boys versus girls, it was decided to focus on the predominant conceptualisation of the tween construct; females.

In line with Richardson's (1994) conceptualisation of multiple methods within the interpretivst domain as 'crystalisation', five different data collection methods were employed; namely 15 personal diaries, 5 accompanied shopping trips, 30 in-depth interviews (which were conducted at two separate intervals), researcher diaries and 15 e-collages. Each method was chosen so as to fulfil a specific purpose and reflect a unique and yet holistic perspective on the lived experience and consumption practices of the liminars, aligning with

Richardson's (1994: p523) premise that 'what we see depends on the angle of our repose'. Due to space constraints within this paper, only data from interviews and diaries is presented.

In line with McCracken's (1988: p41) assertion that analysis of qualitative data must prove 'mechanistic and indeterminate in roughly equal portions', the approach to analysing the output of such a myriad set of data collection techniques required a specific combination of creative scope firmly underlined by systematic rigour. Cognisant of this, a grounded theory process of analysis – comprising stages of transcription, open coding, and memo writing - was utilised which fulfilled such criteria. Next inductive analysis of interview and diary transcripts, as well as researcher diary content and shopping trip field notes was carried out. The process of these preliminary stages of analysis progressed towards axial coding and selective coding with a view to identifying a 'core cateogry or construct around which the other categories and constructs revolve that relates them to one another' (Spiggle, 1994: p495).

This strategic and yet essentially creative process of data analysis culminated in a stage of data interpretation. Data interpretation was carried out in the manner of 'a hermeneutic circle' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; p63, Thompson et al, 1994: p433) which is best characterised as an iterative procedure whereby interpretation was essentially a back and forth process; back and forth between personal meaning and theoretical background as well as between phase one and phase two of data collection.

**Research Findings and Analysis**

The following section details one of the central findings of the first phase of data collection – during the last months of primary school – the theory of metaconsumption. Although the main focus of this paper is the metaconsumption theorized as reflective of the consumption practices engaged with by the liminal tweens, it is necessary to briefly ground this theory in the context in which it emerged.  This contextual grounding lays the foundation for the emergence of the metaconsumption theory.

**The Liminal Tween**

As discussed throughout the literature review, the theoretical framework of liminality (Turner, 1967; 1969; 1974) was utilized as a prism for interpreting the cultural and social categorization of these ambiguously located beings. Due to space constraints there will be a brief delineation of one of the component concepts of the notion of the liminal tween;

clashing age perceptions. This and many other instances of liminality that emerged throughout the data add empirical credence to the social invisibility experienced by these 'betwixt and between' girls. This sense of being socially imperceptible would emerge as a focal point for the metaconsumption strategies engaged with by these interstitial consumers.

## *Clashing Age Perceptions*

Established within the specific elements of Turner's (1967) theorization of liminality is acknowledgement of the ambiguity and indeterminacy that embodies the experience of one who exists as a miasma of socio-cultural categorization and perceptions. One of the most overtly liminal components of the tween identity was the tension experienced between their own conceptualization of how others in society should react to them versus the reality of their social positioning. Testament to the theorization that these girls are no longer, but not yet, their social and personal categorizations were often at odds with one another resulting in an acute sense of social invisibility and often darkness for the girls. Their sense of impending immersion into a teen sphere of social interaction was not matched with others' behaviors' towards them.

In the following interview excerpt, Elaine informs me that although she is given the responsibility of caring for her own brother and sister, many people outside of her family would consider her age far too young to be held responsible for their children. However she is quick to point out that she herself does not hold the same view.

**E:** *'but I am far more mature than a lot of 13 year olds I know…I think it is more to do with the fact that people hear 12 years old and they think oh that's too young to babysit children…*

**K:** *'and when do you think they would be okay with it….other people'*

**E:** *'I think at about 14 or 15 it is more acceptable, by other people, to be babysitting for children'*

Here Elaine finds herself grappling with her own sense of personal development and the views of those who ascribe to the wider social implications of age-aligned development, socialization and consequent competencies. She exists awkwardly at the threshold of what is deemed acceptable socially and how she considers herself personally; blurring boundaries, confusing classification.

In this marketplace example, Rachel highlights the tension she experiences between her own sense of distance from a child-like persona but concurrently other peoples' conceptualization of her as far removed from the realms of teen consumer autonomy.

**K:** *'and how do you decide what to buy….when you're shopping'*

**R:** *'well probably like….when my mother's coming down town with me…and it's like oh this is lovely and she calls over the shop assistant…then I feel like such a child and I'm like oh no I hate that and she's like oh yea this is lovely, try this on….and I'm like oh no…I hate this outfit…like I hate the pants or something…and then you know the way you wouldn't want to say it in front of the shop assistant and then you're just like…oh okay I'll try it on'*

Rachel's experience with the sales assistant exemplifies her occupation of or location in a category lacking boundaries or clarification and as a result her developing sense of autonomy and independence resides uncomfortably beside society's attempts to classify her as a child. Although understanding herself as a competent, self-knowing consumer, this is not how others behave towards her. Thus Rachel's experience of shopping results in a clashing of subjectivities owing to her existence as a 'betwixt and between' (Cook, 2004), exemplifying an interim subjectivity, a liminal self.

**The Egocentric Tween**

The incorporation of a theoretical perspective from the field of psychology was an emergent development following initial data analysis. Elkind's (1967) notion of egocentrism is considered by those specializing in the field of adolescent psychology, to be an under-researched idea, with constructive potential for anyone attempting to theorize on the lived experiences of young adolescents (Elliot & Feldman, 1990). In essence, Elkind's theory centres on the advanced cognitive capabilities of those approaching adolescence status in particular their increased ability to incorporate the perspectives of others into their own way of thinking and understanding themselves and the world around them. What differentiates adolescents however, and perhaps most pertinent to this research, is the tendency of this group to over-generalize and believe themselves to be the focus of most other people's attention all of the time akin to an 'imaginary audience' (Elkind, 1967).

Amanda's interview illustrates vividly her tendency to incorporate an imagined audience into her developing self-system. She explains that the impending move to secondary school has meant divesting herself of any stationary that would be considered young or child like, in the hope of avoiding what she imagines would be certain disdain and ridicule from her new class mates.

**K:** *'what else did you have to buy for secondary school?'*

**A:** *'yea like I used to have all these little parers[2] and little fancy girly parers but then I was like I'd probably get into trouble….people would be like 'why do you have that'…so I went for a plain pencil parer'…*

**K:** *'what would people think if you have a plain pencil parer?'*

**A:** *'if you had a big girl sittin up on the table they might be like hmmmmm…baby….*

Here Amanda is using the imagined reactions of her peers to alter her consumption repertoire and future buying habits. It is almost like how she envisages her class-mates reacting to her display of consumption objects, is harnessed and utilized as a gauge for what will be suitable to bring along to secondary school. At this point in time, Amanda has not yet experienced the social environs of secondary school at first hand. However her advancing cognitive abilities have allowed her to consider the perspective of those girls she has yet to meet, albeit to an exaggerated degree. Even something as seemingly unrelated to social judgments and ridicule as the theft of her MP3 player is reflective of the egocentric nature of Amanda's developing self.

**A:** *'I nearly made myself sick thinking about it….i dunno why I got so upset about it….'*

**K:** *'was it to do with losing your zen…or that it was robbed by someone….'*

**A:** *'I dunno…I guess it was a bit of both….i just dunno….i just cracked….i imagined everyone will think I can't look after stuff…'*

In this example it appears that what had unsettled Amanda so much following the theft of her MP3 player was less to do with the physical void of the item but more with what she imagined the incident conveyed to others about her ability to be responsible for her possessions. Egocentrically, she believes this mishap to be the sole focus of others' attentions.

**Metaconsumption**

As outlined above, the liminars' lived experiences are characterized by social ambiguity, categorical invisibility and an overt preoccupation with how they appear in the eyes of those around them. It emerged throughout the data analysis that despite their conveyed annoyance at their status as social non-descripts, their shadowed realities were a vital resource. As evidenced in the data, various consumption strategies were being utilized by the tweens in order to paradoxically evade definite categorization via consumption owing to their

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[2] Parer is an Irish slang word referring to pencil sharpener

egocentric tendencies and fear of social reprisal, prior to a more assured and competent entry into teenager-hood. But concurrently these strategies enable the tweens to tentatively participate in the consumer culture towards which they know their imperatives must be oriented if they are to be accepted by friends and envisaged onlookers.

Regardless of contextual application, the pre-fix 'meta' denotes 'something of a higher or second-order kind' (OED, 2009). A relatively recent consideration within the domain of cognitive analysis is that of second order thinking; or 'thinking about thinking' (Keating, 1990). Metacognition is frequently studied within the realm of psychology as 'the ability to monitor one's own cognitive abilities and activity for consistency, for gaps in information that need to be filled' (Keating, 1990: p75). This theory appeared to have potential for application within the domain of this instance of consumer research. When re-appropriated to analyze the emergent consumption practices of these liminal tweens, the theory of metaconsumption emerged as a viable theoretical process. Fundamentally metaconsumption was envisaged as involving a variety of second order consumption practices; or consumption about consumption. Specifically these metaconsumptive practices focused on consumption mastery, regulation & monitoring of consumption experiences & knowledge for gaps that need to be filled, as opposed to tangible marketplace experiences.

During this liminal existence, these metaconsumption strategies, as will be outlined, served to realize the main preoccupation of a tween; remaining covertly active. It appears to be one of the primary preoccupations of the liminal experience, the main product of this ambiguous, obscure interval. Eluding definite categorization as either child or teen, the tweens channel this cultural anonymity into preparing for one of the most socially pertinent roles of their lives thus far; becoming a teenager.

The metaconsumption practices outlined below highlight not a concrete socialization process of liminal tween to secure teenager, but rather an intricate interweaving of relationships between consumption and identities - past, present and future- as these social neophytes mediate the intricacies of their interstitial positioning.

**Brand Apathy**

The nexus of the metaconsumption strategy is thus the maintenance of an unobtrusive, yet concurrently burgeoning site of consumption, which the liminal period appears to represent for these girls. Several strategies had at their core the notion that any activity, which

wrenched the girls from the comfort of their categorical ambiguity and assign them to either a child or teen status before they feel prepared, is detrimental. One concept reflective of the tweens' striving towards consumption practices that facilitate preservation of their social anonymity, for fear of premature emergence before their imagined audience, is brand apathy. Pervasive throughout the first interview data is a definite reluctance by the girls to express an alignment with or affinity to branded products for fear of making an error conducive to social exclusion and ridicule. Contrary to the abundant secondary research in this area (e.g. Siegal et al, 2004; Lindstrom, 2003b; McNeal, 1992), the girls displayed a noticeable reticence when a discussion of brands and their importance to them arose.

A metaconsumption strategy seemingly utilized in order to convey a purposeful apathy about branded items is price preoccupation. There are numerous examples throughout the first interview data, which suggest that reverting to the reliable utilitarian justification of 'because non-branded things are cheaper', allays the possibility that their incompetence with consumer culture will be brought to notice.

Two excerpts from Rachel's interview add credence to the notion that apathy or resistance toward acknowledging the centrality of brands to their lived experiences is a strategic defense mechanism often couched in a fixation on value for money, designed to protect the shadow side of their being, their liminal regeneration.

**K:** *'and do you think brands matter to people in your class….well not just your class…but your friends….do ye talk about brands at all?'*

**R:** *'amm….not really….the main place that we go is penneys[3]….coz it's so cheap and it actually does have some nice clothes and stuff…and they just have everything at a really cheap price… and say if you went into somewhere else…like where would you go…am…really expensive like Pauls or somewhere….and you'd see the same string top or the same jumper for like fifty euro and like the one you could get in penneys would be like fifteen or twenty…'*

In this first passage, Rachel's attitude is analogous to the other tweens, in that she justifies her supposed detachment from branded goods by referral to the value for money at non-branded stores. However just minutes later, Rachel recalls the experience of buying a new outfit for her confirmation a couple of months previously.

**K:** *'and what other shops would you go to….say if you went in with your mum?'*

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[3] Penney's is a discount clothing and accessories store in Ireland

**R:** *'well radical[4] I bought my confirmation outfit in.*

**K:** *'what kind of outfit did you get?'*

**R:** *'well I got these grey bench combats….they're really nice and I got this tee-shirt and I love it I wear it all the time…and I got a bench hoody….and am its really cool you can put on the sleeve you can put your thumb through a little hole in it…its really cool…and I got my runners[5] there as well….they're van.'*

It appears therefore that Rachel's earlier expressed indifference to brands is not consistent with her behaviour. In this instance, when her mother's financial agency enters the equation, and Rachel has had a tangible experience with a brand, Rachel's priorities change and the non-branded shop doesn't get a mention. Rather she manages to list two big brands in her purchases. Surely if the non-branded store is such good value, her mother's financial resources would have gone a long way further? Clearly Rachel's interview, visible in part through this inconsistency, suggests that indifference is a defense mechanism. Expressing a detachment from the world of labels, logos and symbolism is less important a goal when resources not available to the neophyte materialize.

**Parody**

Cognizant of the fact that the core of the metaconsumption strategy is its focus on existing without exhibiting, I was made aware of yet another component of this strategy during the accompanied shopping trips. This strategy centred on the agentive dimension of this liminal shadow in which the tweens exist; consumption strategies that evinced monitoring and acquiring of information and competencies needed when the time came to lead their liminal cocoon and embrace young teen identity.

During these shopping trips, the ambiguity and ensuing tension that the girls experienced in many of the shops seemed to stem from their recurring misallocation as a group or social category. At times the shops we visited were so beyond the realm of possibility for these girls on every level, while concurrently other stores evinced notions of a former childhood self that they were eager to forsake. In other words, it was palpable throughout these trips, that expressing interest in particular items was a risky, value-laden endeavor. Signaling interest in an item deemed 'inappropriate' in any dimension appeared to represent social suicide. I soon realized that these weren't just shopping trips, but opportunities to manage, protect and accumulate the knowledge that was expected of them as young, female consumers.

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[4] Radical is a store in Ireland which stocks branded clothing and footware
[5] Runners is Irish slang for trainers/sneakers

The concept of parody emerged as a means through which the girls could openly experiment with possible signifiers and configurations of consumption, but maintain a distance from any personal reflections ensuing because of these experiments at the same time. It allowed them to exist without exhibiting. During the shopping trip with three tweens for example, I witnessed firsthand the use of this strategy. On entering one particular store, the girls picked up random tops and skirts claiming 'this is so you' or 'this is my dream outfit'. I only realized after chatting to the girls later on, that this was a statement of sarcasm meant to denote that something was not to their taste and they weren't at all genuine in their sentiments. However although it was not genuine admiration they espoused, expressing opinions or preferences couched in parody or mockery, protects the girls' vulnerability at a time when their level of consumer experience is limited.

**The Fake Facilitators**

This concept refers to the conclusion that many of the girls chose to forsake a preoccupation with having the genuine brand and instead focused on manipulating and utilizing the sign value even associated with counterfeit versions to assert a provisional foot into the world of teen consumption. Therefore although many of the 'brands' they possess are in fact fakes, these products nonetheless facilitate a participation in a version of consumer culture, however diluted. This strategy allows for an engagement with the imperatives that dominate teen consumption but concurrently does not demand the resources only attributed to those of a more defined societal categorization such as finances, life experience or definite market place allocation. In this example, Katie is taking me through some of the possession in her room, including a fake Von-Dutch cap. Interestingly she herself points out that it is a fake.

**K:** *'What other brands do you use?'*

**KL:** *'von dutch…I got those in Majorca…they have lasted me two years now'*

**K:** *'wow…and do you have any other von dutch stuff….do you know much about the brand?'*

Katie roots underneath her bed
**K:** *'ooh a cap…do you wear that much'*

**KL:** *'yeah…its fake von dutch…but it's still von dutch'*

What Katie seems to mean here is that to others, it still appears to be Von Dutch, or at the very least she is appearing to others to be engaging with the brands that form the appropriate staple diet of any normative teen. The important thing for Katie then is appearances rather than authenticity. Appearances maintains the shadow side of their being so that they can incur

as little anticipated social ridicule as possible while they experiment with the intricacies of the teen persona/consumption dialectic.

Although the use of fake brands is not a consumption practice limited to this age group, the role that these brands play in the lived experience of a liminal tween is significant towards understanding how consumption is enacted during a time of social invisibility.

**Discussion**

This paper has described some of the constituent elements of metaconsumption; the proposed theorization of the liminars' consumption practices and a suggested diversion from 'the effects' perspective on young consumers' socialization. Being neither a child consumer nor a teen purchaser implies that there exists a gap between the self they were and the self they long to be and the liminal status that ensues. In addition, advancing cognitive capacities instil the tweens with a flagrant sense of trepidation regarding their neophyte-like social standing and potential public transgressions. Consequently they long to reside in the shadowed side of being, attempting to learn, monitor and accumulate socially oriented consumer knowledge, but all the while protect and maintain the anonymity that shields them from social scrutiny and insinuations. This intense period of second order consumption practices, or 'consumption focused on consumption' aligning oneself with the nuances and mores of the social sphere which will help sculpt their entry into teenager-hood, provides examples of a myriad consumption strategies and practices which further a theorization of liminal beings and their consumption practices. In addition, metaconsumption advances the burgeoning area of children's consumer culture research which attempts to explore the mediation of socio-cultural hierarchies and boundaries by young people via their relationships with consumption.

Thus this desire to exist without exhibiting is the core characteristic of the liminal existence and subsequently the theory of metaconsumption has an integral role in its manifestation. For example, the visible propensity of the tweens to convey decided apathy and even resistance towards branded consumption with the variant but related strategy of price preoccupation, was reflective of an effort to preserve the unspecific nature of their social categorization. Not committing to a brand meant not committing to an (unfinished) teen identity. This theoretical conclusion stands in stark contrast to the prevalent literature on branded consumption, whether conceptually, theoretically or managerially oriented (Lindstrom, 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004; Elliot & Leonard, 2004) that convey brand-oriented consumption as a transparently positive and desired facet of tween consumer culture.

However it is equally as intrinsic to the liminal existence that this period of time is not entirely static. As theorized by Douglas (1966, p.137) in relation to interstitial existences 'there is energy in the margins and unstructured areas'. A degree of agency must become part of the metaconsumptive practices of the tween if they are to progress towards the essence of their teen identity (Jenks, 2003). Thus the concepts of the fake facilitators and parody encapsulate the covert but fervent accumulation of consumer-oriented knowledge and experience that concurrently embodies the liminar's 'betwixt and between' existence.

Cognizant of the tweens' concurrent engagement with and detachment from consumption practices, the liminal period is proposed to represent a fruitful darkness (Turner, 1967, p110).
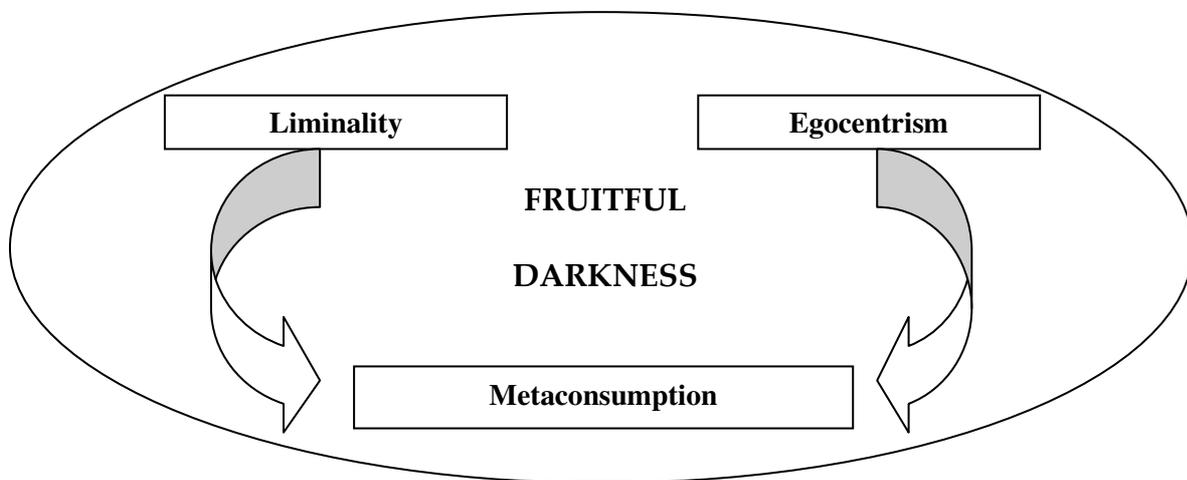


Akin to understudies waiting in the wings anxiously ingesting as much information as possible in order to better prepare themselves for the biggest performative role of their lives to date – which as of yet is just out of sight – the fructile chaos of the fruitful darkness facilitates a private rehearsal for what will eventually be a very public performance. The metaphor of the fruitful darkness embodies the concurrent darkness and energy, the restorative obscurity that epitomizes the liminars' experiences with consumer culture within the interstices of socio-cultural categorization. Although at times the tweens appear passive or nonchalant about many of the signifiers of teen culture, this passivity appears to belie a fervent task. Turner (1967, p.102) similarly theorized when he claimed that during the liminal period 'his apparent passivity is revealed as an absorption of powers which will become active after his social status has been redefined…'

**Conclusion**

In this paper we locate our work firmly within this evolved epistemological framework which aims to move away from Sisyphean debates on dichotomy or 'effects' dominated understandings of childrens' relationships with consumer culture. We began from the premise that studies of young consumers and their interactions with consumption have been stifled by a fixation on 'effects' approaches to the detriment of interpretive explorations of the social relationships which emerge between young people and various realms of consumer culture and practices, cognizant of the boundaries and hierarchies which constitute their social world.

Rather we sought to explore consumption in line with the view of 'children's agency in the very moment that children themselves are learning about and coming to grips with the constraints and possibilities of the very differently structured environments they encounter in their everyday lives' (James and Prout, 1996: p46). Thus by stepping outside of the dichotomy debate as well as the 'production of consumption' perspective via the adoption of a 'doing childhood' epistemological orientation, this research contributes to a timely re-focus within the discipline. In addition, through the methodological tools of diaries, in-depth interviews, collages and shopping trips, the voice of the child consumer was resurrected from the sea of effects oriented research which has threatened to subsume the child's own perspective beneath a mass of abstract theorisations and social constructions; thereby reconsidering the richness of children's voices.

The complex intimacy uncovered between young adolescent identity and the marketplace attests to the blurred boundary between personhood and consumerism, however problematic that inference may be (Langer, 2005). It is clear that in times when that identity is liminal, slipping between the cracks of socio-cultural organisation, consumption practices take on a preparatory, mediating force, theorised as a unique form of metaconsumption. Thus those who resemble social neophytes, understudies waiting in the wings between the signifying worlds of child and teen, through their consumption practices embody not darkness but rather a fruitful indeterminacy.

*'(Liminality).... it is a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process' (Turner & Bruner, 1986; p42).*

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