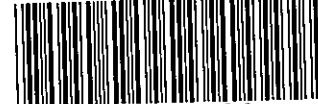


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CHILDREN'S MAKE-UP: MASKING THE CONTRADICTIONS

Wendy Varney

Many revealing contradictions of capitalism are found within the sphere of consumption. Consumer items have been developed essentially with profit motives in mind but they must also bring a package of appeal to the potential consumer. As Wolfgang Haug reminds us, "Commodity production does not set as its aim the production of use-values as such, but rather, producing to sell" (Haug, 1986:6).

Some fascinating and contradiction-laden items result, such as the range of toy make-up targeted at young girls since the early 1980s. The economic and social impetus behind this development warrants examination. The major contradiction within these artefacts is that they diminish somewhat the notion of childhood as a distinctly separate phase, yet simultaneously reinforce children as a market niche which must have their own separate products. To understand how such a product innovation came to be developed, it is necessary to take account of the importance of childhood as a distinct marketing niche, the pressures that have been brought to bear by other industries that have sought to shorten the "childhood" phase, and the social milieu into which the product innovation has had to fit.

The upsurge in the marketing of toy make-up for young girls - and the industry stresses that it is a toy (*Toy and Hobby Retailer*, April 1981) - runs against the grain of many of the initiatives of the women's movement at a time when women might have been expected to make headway against pressures on them to conform to standards of appearance. This has happened against a background of increasing commercialisation which has impacted heavily on children's

commodities and services. The influence of the corporate sector on the direction of toy technology reinforces gender stereotyping and may well retard, in children's culture, the reflection of more progressive social attitudes towards gender.

The emergence of child consumers

The construction of childhood and its use as a vehicle for marketing developed over a long period. Both are fundamental to the notions which underpin the marketing of children's toys. The emergence of such a distinct marketing niche could never have occurred had childhood not undergone the peculiar ideological development that it has over the past several centuries. The creation of childhood, as vividly described by Philippe Aries (1962), saw the world of children become a phase of life distinct from that of adulthood. This new phase was characterised by special physical and emotional requirements, far different from and more extensive than those which had previously been considered to comprise the needs of children.

Moreover, Lockean attitudes which prevailed from the Eighteenth Century in the English-speaking world encouraged more attachment to, and indulgence of, children. No doubt, in a society where manufacturers and a burgeoning middle class made it possible for growing numbers to turn to consumption as a method of etching out one's identity, such attitudes were congruent with expenditure on children. The latter had the dual purpose of expressing one's devotion to and fulfilment of responsibility for one's children, which had come to be a high social priority, while also using children as yardsticks of social status. Their education, dress and other visible attributes could readily establish the standing of parents. By the end of the 18th Century in England, children of at least the middle and upper classes "had become luxury objects upon which their mothers and fathers were willing to spend larger and larger sums of money" for their education, entertainment and amusement (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 1982:301).

The consumer patterns which treated children as having distinct needs must surely have lent considerable weight to the differentiation of

children from adults. The dressing of children as entities of a world apart from adulthood ensures the development and continuation of treatment and behaviour along just such lines. Nurseries were built for at least the middle-class children, where they ate their meals from crockery designed specifically for them, from the end of the nineteenth century (Adrian Forty, 1986:67-68). These made seem natural a separation which had been largely constructed in accordance with the socio-economic climate of the day. The 'economic' and 'cultural' come together and in a way which has generally served the interests of the toy industry since its emergence in the late 18th century. Toys took on new and more significant meanings as toy manufacturers jostled to have them firmly placed within the lives of children as a growing literature emphasised the importance of play.

It is difficult to know how much the marketing aspirations of manufacturers to cut out distinct market niches for children have contributed to the separation of childhood from adulthood. Yet we can be sure their efforts did not subside in the wake of the separation. On the contrary, there have been vigorous efforts to further segment the market by claiming vast differences among age groupings, so that parents and carers are expected to equip children with quite different goods at different ages as well as differentiating along gender lines (Varney, 1993(a):12-13). The depth of needs has also been pushed to new boundaries. Beryl Langer has compiled a list for the "advanced capitalist baby" who "might be seen as deprived without the requisite changing table, three-way basinette/pram/stroller, bouncinette, car module, car seat, porta-cot, Jolly Jumper, ...several sizes of baby bath, carrying pouch, back pack, and so on" (Langer, 1989:31). She identifies these trends as signalling a new phase in the commodification of childhood.

However, the market niche was complicated and enhanced by the emergence of children as consumers in their own right. This was particularly evident in the post-World War Two period but most evident since the 1980s, which McNeal claims to be "the decade of the child consumer" (McNeal, 1992:6). Whereas goods for children were initially designed to attract adults (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 1982:301), marketers were now being urged not to underestimate the buying power

of children. "A 10-year-old averages about five visits a week to five different stores, or 250 store visits a year," *American Demographics* informed its audience before switching from statistical to marketing mode: "This is a lot of opportunity for business to cultivate children as customers" (McNeal, 1990:36-39).

Business did precisely that, cultivating child consumers not only in the US but generally in the Western world. In-school promotions, direct marketing to children, event sponsorship, product-related children's television programs and product licensing are among the numerous marketing strategies successfully used to separate children from their money. While none of these are confined to the last few years, most of them have reached new heights during that time. The well publicised efforts of McDonald's to get its promotional wing into NSW schools is only the tip of the iceberg (Varney, 1993(b):12). Sega-Ozisoft has been particularly successful at targeting children in Australia. A representative of that company was among speakers who shared their marketing secrets at a "Consumer Kids" conference in Sydney in September 1993. The promotional brochure urged potential participants to "Grab your share of the multi billion dollar kids' market," explaining that "Australia's Consumer Kids contributed to more than \$3 billion in sales in 1992" (conference brochure, 1993:4).

The spawning of new services for children, particularly the emergence of children's own magazines and (in the US) children's own television and radio networks, has translated directly into new avenues for advertising directly to children. Marketers celebrate "a steadily increasing disposable income and a highly discretionary spending power" among these children (Consumer Kids conference brochure, 1993:4).

While increasing disposable income heralded good news for toy manufacturers whose goods (along with snack foods) have constituted the traditional major areas for children's expenditure, the trends have also had a downside for the industry. An increasing number of other industries are making claims on the children's market. There is not only competition between toy categories and toy companies but between toys and other goods and services directed at children. That there was already stiff competition between toy companies is evidenced by the

high security measures taken by some of the larger toy companies to keep plans for unlaunched toys under wraps (Stern and Schoenhaus, 1990:240-241). The industry has voiced concern that children are being encouraged to grow up faster, in pursuit of such adult commodities as sound systems, expensive watches, personal televisions and VCRs (McKee, 1991:17). Yet it is not simply the shortening of the toy phase which worries the industry. In some respects the enveloping of children into a world of adult commodities represents an assault on the notion of childhood which is so basic to the marketing of toys.

The fashion industry has applauded children's increasing interest in purchasing clothes, claiming that by the time they are eight "they know which labels they like and frequently where to buy them as well" (Bagnall, 1992:34). Frank Stilwell has pointed to the development of music groups such as Abba in the mid 1970s (and later the Bay City Rollers) as attempts by the music industry to embrace ever younger consumers to increase the market (Stilwell, 1977:83-86). A shift in focus of the musical form and lyrics made such 'Disco Duck' music appealing to children in much the same way as adolescents had been specifically targeted by similar shifts within the music industry in the 1960s. Such consumer shifts have obviously posed a threat to the toy industry. Not only do these commodities compete with toys, but the image they carry with them tends to encourage children to leave behind the more ostentatiously childish aspects of childhood.

Accommodating the conflict

There is no doubt that modern notions of childhood have continued to hold wide currency. Nevertheless, the challenge to the strength of those notions in some economic areas has resulted in some dissolving of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood as they relate to commodities. This has needed resolution.

The marketing and retailing arena has provided part of the solution, which is manifest in the global march of the giant toy supermarket Toys 'R' Us. That toy supermarket's recent arrival in Australia gives notice that those with knowledge of the toy market and the capital to back it

up can not only win back children to toys but can seize a larger share of the children's market. Aggressive pricing and marketing of toys by Toys 'R' Us and its local large competitor in Australia, World 4 Kids, has toy analysts expectant that Australians will indeed be spending much more money on toys within several years. This scenario has occurred wherever Toys 'R' Us has gone (Ryan, 1993:42).

Another part of the solution has taken the form of product innovation within which the conflict could be resolved. Ted Levitt's 1960 claim that the management of a corporation "must think of itself not as producing products but as providing customer-creating satisfactions" is still well quoted among markets (Lorenz, 1986:33). Such 'satisfactions' are patently more easily created, and with less risk, by fitting in with other satisfactions already prescribed within the cultural framework.

Toy companies pitch their goods at audiences which are recipients of other corporate messages. The other corporations are sometimes completely in alliance with toy companies, as when coming together to promote 'concepts' from which all expect to benefit. At other times they are in opposition. While one industry is attempting to segment and specialise, another may be attempting to have its range encompass as broad an assembly of consumers as possible. However, it may also be segmenting and specialising within that range. Toy companies do not have complete control but must walk a line which maximises consumer receptiveness to their goods without expending unnecessary energy deflating other corporate messages. The line of least resistance is often the most profitable, finding a category which can fit snugly in with corporate trends being established by other industrial sectors. A toy category is therefore often determined not simply by the toy companies but by the dynamics of a conglomeration of industrial interests.

The emergence, in the early 1980s, of a strong category centred on toy make-up and other beauty products for girls provides evidence of the influence of such a conglomeration of interests. The irony of toy make-up is that it borrows from two contradictory ideas. It appeals to the desire in young girls to be mature and to break away from "kid stuff" in line with commercial trends that try to capture ever younger markets and glamorise adolescence. Yet it simultaneously holds sacred the idea that childhood is distinct and must have its own commodities. Toy

make-up is not a new product, Tinkerbell having produced the line since 1951 (Wells, 1989:46). However, since the early 1980s it has received the attention of a toy industry determined to heighten its profile and turn it into a major category among girls' toys in response to influences coming from outside the toy industry. *Toys International and the Retailer* put it simply: "As girls leave toys to purchase clothes, records and posters at an even younger age - toy manufacturers have found a way of making up the market" (April 1981:21).

Toy make-up is not the only toy range of the 1980s which included this new focus. A popular range of toy microphones allowed young girls to imitate the pop stars who were now being packaged to appeal to them as well as to adolescents. Fashion dolls, which had already provided much of the groundwork for young girls to turn their attention to their post-puberty years, also took a turn in the same direction. Kenner released a rock band for their Glamour Gals fashion dolls in 1982. When Hasbro released Jem, a rock-music star fashion doll with her own back-up band, in 1986, Mattel immediately retaliated with a four-member band for its Rocker Barbie. Other such toys included the Hip Yick electronic Rockin' Dancer, which danced to music and Meritus's Rock n Roxy Dance Club, a playset for fashion dolls. It included a working speaker that could be attached to a child's cassette player (*Playthings*, July 1987:50). Children's cassette players and radios, coming in bright colours and imaginative patterns, were becoming popular items, so toy manufacturers moved to incorporate their popularity into toy plans.

However, it was toy make-up and beauty products, along the lines of those marketed to teenage girls and women, which were at the heart of this new emphasis in toys. By 1981 there was a major expansion in the toy cosmetic market in the USA (*Playthings*, July 1987:27). One survey showed that toy cosmetics had grown 280 per cent in dollar volume from the previous year (Gilligan, 1982:58). The toylines were similarly enjoying popularity in Australia, where many toy concepts are imported lock, stock and barrel from the USA. The leading toy manufacturers, and many of the smaller ones, had all rushed to put out their own versions.

While most of these were simply make-up marketed specifically at children, some did include novelty features or a 'play' aspect which would appeal to children. With Hasbro's Glamour Sticks, for example, girls could make their own cosmetic pencils before using them. Mattel's range of Barbie cosmetics cleverly included products such as the "Double Yum" cosmetics which combined flavours in the make-up, such as strawberry with banana split, peanut butter with jelly and hot chocolate with marshmallow. This ensured that the appeal of traditional children's foodstuffs sugared the way to the door of adulthood. Such products simultaneously urged young girls to be both childish and grown-up, which is not altogether inconsistent with other representations of women, which show them to forever retain their childishness and their likeness to, and liking for, food (Varney, unpublished). Other toy firms made similar links with food. Knickerbocker's lipstick came in the flavour of ginger snaps and its eyeshadow, cherry chocolate, while Mego's Princess Play cosmetics included "candy-flavored lipsticks" (*Playthings*, February 1981:271).

Mattel followed up with a Barbie perfume maker and the highly successful Li'l Miss Make-up. The latter brought Mattel \$40 million worth of business in the toy's first year (Masters, 1990:90), that figure doubling in the following year (*Business Month*, April 1990:30). The category of toy beauty products did not end at lipstick and eye shadow but extended to modelling heads, vanity cases, vanity tables and 'beauty centres'. In the USA by 1982 there were estimated to be 115 toy beauty products available on the market (*Toys International and the Retailer*, April 1988:28).

The cosmetic industry soon jumped on the bandwagon with its own children's versions of make-up. Revlon pounced in with a fragrance called Electric Youth, named after a popular song sung by a teen idol. Parfums Givenchy pushed back the age barrier further with *Tartine et Chocolat*, a citrus-smelling perfume marketed for babies as well as girls (Wells, 1989:46). However, it was the toy industry which had a firm hold on the market and the cosmetics were generally targeted at girls upwards of three or five years of age. Ironically, where the music industry had tried to push back the age of adolescence, the toy industry - the very industry whose interests are so tied to the distinction of

childhood - virtually obliterated the distinction. In doing so, the industry had to accommodate this encroachment of adolescence into childhood within a particular marketing framework which ensured that children retained their own distinct commodities, even if they bore little difference, apart from image, to those of adults. While the economic objectives of large toy manufacturers are ironclad, methods of arriving at those ends must be flexible and it is this that leads to such striking contradictions.

The Social Matrix

Any toy has to fit into a social matrix and can be doomed if it runs counter to what is deemed acceptable and desirable. Hasbro learned this lesson when it overstepped the mark of social acceptability with its *Inhumanoids*, a series of toy monsters that aroused fear in children (Kline, 1993:268-269). Far better than acceptability, however, from the toy manufacturers' viewpoint, is a positive fit into a dominant ideology and trends related to that ideology. The development of toy make-up coincided with a growing pressure on women to meet beauty standards. Naomi Wolf has drawn attention to a backlash against feminism which saw eating disorders among women rise exponentially, cosmetic surgery become the fastest growing medical speciality and pornography establish itself as a major media category, all during the decade of the 1980s (Wolf, 1991:10).

There were several sources of this pressure. One was a mix of conservative forces who sought to re-establish the domestic sphere as the appropriate sphere for women and who clutched onto the idea of 'true womanhood,' as epitomised by visual displays of femininity, as its symbol. No doubt they were able to recruit others who were confused about the dual responsibilities and dual demands which women seemed to face and who sought comfort in the seemingly less ambiguous 'traditional' woman. These tensions were joined and exploited by a burgeoning beauty industry which sought to promulgate the importance, for both genders, of meeting certain physical expectations.

According to Andrew Wernick, in the past several decades, in some respects and particularly where it suits commercial interests, "advertisers have begun to treat male and female...as formally interchangeable terms." In several ways "the promotional imaging of men has softened in that direction," he says, noting that this has suited manufacturers who now wish to sell beauty products and household goods to men, thus expanding the market (Wernick, 1991:51). If the hard edges have been smoothed off perceptions of masculinity, however, there is little in the advertising of beauty products to women which would suggest that the converse is the case with regard to 'femininity.' The promotion of toy make-up has ensured that young girls are now exposed to the same social expectations about appearances as their older sisters, for whom the pressures, meanwhile, have been intensified.

Pressure on women to be beautiful undermines women's self-esteem. It diverts them from the issues underlying their oppression and helps enforce a framework of separate criteria by which women and men are evaluated. While it is not suggested that toy manufacturers consciously set out to buttress expectations on women to be beautiful, the products must be seen as yet another cultural example of that pressure. The theme is explicit in the Barbie cosmetics case, "designed to have everything a little girl needs to be super-glamorous" (*Playthings*, June 1981:97), and the Deluxe Vanity Table. The latter comes with a light-up mirror, four storage compartments, a blow drier, hair and beauty accessories and is described as "a little girl's dream" (Toyland's Christmas Catalogue, 1992:6). These products both reflect and contribute to pressure on girls and women. Only within the social setting of such pressures was toy make-up likely to be so successful.

These social forces themselves had an economic basis. There are many who benefit from women being confined to a separate sphere. This is not to deny that there are some corporations who might benefit from the erasure of separate spheres or from the delineation of a greater number of 'types.' Mattel accidentally stumbled across a market it was not looking for when it brought out Earring Ken. The doll, with an earring in its ear, was meant as nothing more than a male companion for Earring Barbie who was herself adorned with earrings. However, gay

men in the USA gave their own meaning to Earring Ken and purchased great numbers of the doll (*Toy and Hobby Retailer*, December 1993:13). Toy manufacturers are not in complete control of toys' meanings but, notwithstanding exceptions such as Earring Ken, their gender codings offer limited opportunities for children to develop play beyond the rigid stereotypes they propagate.

Toy make-up is thus a product innovation which has been pursued for two reasons favourable to the toy industry. It accommodated two quite differing notions of childhood without drawing attention to the contradiction. It was also able to take advantage of heightened social demands on women, particularly with regard to their appearance. In such a political climate, the enticing advertising campaigns devoted to girls' beauty products were well equipped and culturally sustained to create a demand for these toys, as they fitted into other existing campaigns for adult beauty products.

The toy industry had backed a winner. But winners in the toy business can be short-lived. The industry needed now to consolidate and further innovate. Innovations sought needed to conceal the contradictions and pull the products back somewhat from the precarious brink of adolescence on which they teetered. While maintaining a children's market, manufacturers of toy make-up were supporting, to some extent, blurring of the previously strict boundaries between children and adults, by producing toys which closely resembled items manufactured for adults. While retaining this pot of gold which was tied to children's make-up, the toy industry also had an interest in reinforcing modern notions of childhood and the great 'need' for toys. Appeal for the new products would have to be two-pronged, still offering the rituals of adulthood but within the context of a more emphatic child's world.

Barbie Comes to Cosmetic-Ville

The result was an integration of toy make-up into a more complex package in which a toy lent the product its image. Dolls, on which images can most easily be hung with the assistance of modern communication and marketing methods, were the favoured toy for this

purpose. The result included such specimens as Secret Beauties, Make Up Beauty, the Wee Li'l Miss Makeup doll and Pretty and Me.

Mattel's Wee Li'l Miss Makeup doll is one of a number of moisture-sensitive toys, this one having make-up appear on it when in contact with cold water. In keeping with 'serial' toys, which encourage multiple purchases, there are three versions. An eye shadow version includes "Real eye shadow for you" while the lipstick and nail polish versions include those respective items for the child. Children from three years up - the age group the toys are marketed to - can mix doll play with the cosmetic ornamentation of themselves which would normally be associated with older women. Pretty and Me is another toy along the same lines, a doll "with real hair colour, make-up and jewellery to wear and share" with its owner (World 4 Kids Catalogue, 1993:59). Similarly, Sun Sensation Barbie comes with lipstick which can be used by its young owner.

Secret Beauties do not share make-up with their owners. Rather they are fairy-like receptacles for their owners' make-up and any doll play offered by them appears to be subordinate to that function. There are four different series of Secret Beauties, each consisting of four flavours or varieties. Make Up Beauty is similarly a doll which serves as a receptacle for make-up.

These toys were shaped, in part, by the perceived need to build a category which leaned on the success of toy make-up but which underscored the toy aspect of the product. They were also shaped by the nature of the toy industry, its assessment of risks and its preferred patterns of innovations. The toy industry is little different from other industries in that it is constantly looking for novelties. The nature of its business is to make old products redundant by means of a new product which promises more. However, due to the risk involved with new fads toy companies try to base the new on something tried and tested.

The upshot of this is that gender codings in toys that do not accurately reflect shifts and challenges in gender relations can be constantly recirculated within the technologies with only minimal, if any, modification to that aspect of them. While the constant striving for profits might ensure that these ideologies will be disposed of as soon as

their economic viability has expired, the ongoing commodities which embrace them prolong their currency. (The irony is that each phase of commodity has only a short lifetime.)

Conclusion

The economic forces which pull technology in certain directions are extremely powerful. In the case of toy make-up and dolls which promote and integrate make-up into play, those forces have proved more powerful than the collective efforts of feminists to broadly challenge the importance placed on women's appearances. Of particular relevance have been the toy industry's own objectives, intersecting with more general economic and political trends. Increasing penetration of capital, even into non-traditional areas, has been the backdrop for the toy industry's attempts to reassert toys as an integral part of childhood. The results have been in the guise of adult products and have embodied many of the gender codings of those adult products.

The toy industry is pulled by other forces and is not entirely in charge of its own destiny. Its efforts to maximise its own interests and the attractiveness of following the line of least resistance with regard to trends coming from other industries are important ingredients in the design and direction of its products. That this generally supports the power of the large corporations that supply children's goods or services has its reverse in the limited input that child consumers and their parents have on the design and direction of these goods.

For instance, there appears to have been no call from consumer groups for children to have their own make-up. The pressure is more likely to have passed from these heavily advertised toys to the child consumers who were being enticed to attend to their appearance either as part of play or as well as play. Such pressures, coming from various sources, made it easier for a market to be built around toy make-up. That toyline may well have added to those mounting pressures on young girls.

Products that arise in the market place are thus neither random nor neutral. They are shaped by a range of economic and social forces and come laden with the contradictions that frequently emerge from these

forces. The dynamics of capitalism, as it manifests itself in clashes for the right to define childhood, in increasing commercialisation of childhood and exploitation of gender tensions, have been at work in the development of toy make-up.

The factors that have shaped commodities might not always be obvious, as indeed children's make-up has passed virtually without comment as to its economic motivations. The process of selection and the artefacts which grow out of it are nonetheless important and laden with economic and social priorities. Certainly the social assumptions and gender defining process which are intricately interwoven into toy make-up and related toys can be expected to endure long after the make-up itself has worn off.

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