

BOOK REVIEW

Review by Debbie Johnson

Schor, J. (2004). *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. New York: Scribner. 275 pages. ISBN 0-684-87055-X. \$25.00 (hard cover)

Juliet Schor, is a professor of sociology at Boston College. Schor is the author of *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*. She is an economist by training and is recognized as an expert on consumerism, economics and family studies. The research for *Born to Buy* began in 2001 when she participated in the Visiting Professor Exchange program run by the Advertising Education Foundation. While participating in this program she was able to visit a number of advertising agencies and conduct informational interviews with professionals in the field.

In *Born to Buy*, Schor examines how children are being marketed to, how marketing to children has changed over time, and the effect of marketing on children. In addition to her investigation of marketing practices, she conducted a survey of 300 fifth- and sixth-grade children to measure children's level of involvement in consumer culture.

Schor's book contains ten chapters. Chapters 1 through 5 take a look at the history of our consumer society, the content of commercial messages, and how advertising infiltrates everyday life including schools. The United States is identified as the most consumer-oriented society in the world, with advertising found in most every social institution and public space. Schor proposes that the companies that make, market and advertise consumer products have now set their sights on children with children responding by "becoming the household member with the most passionate consumer desires, and are the most closely tethered to products, brands, and the latest trends" (p. 11).

In Chapter 6, *Dissecting the Child Consumer*, Schor takes a look at how children are used to gather data which is in turn used to make advertising and marketing decisions. Children are viewed as the "expert", and are involved in all marketing stages, from product design to final ad copy. Children are studied in their home to determine how they interact with products and how products are used. Focus groups are set up to study children's reactions to products. Children are even used to host parties at which they introduce their friends to new products.

Chapter 7 focuses on habit formation and the role advertising plays in the formation of habits of children. Food advertising and its impact on children is discussed at great length, with an emphasis on fast food/healthy food. How parents shop and the impact of the children's food requests are also studied. With today's obesity and health concerns coupled with the fact that eating habits learned in childhood tend to continue as they mature, the topic of food advertisement is highly relevant. The impact of tobacco, alcohol and drug marketing is also questioned. Schor cites a 1998 survey (page 133) in which children six to seventeen identified a beer commercial as their favorite commercial. Schor also looks at how companies pay fees to have their brand names inserted in television programs and movies.

The Survey on Children, Media and the Consumer Culture is discussed in Chapter 8. The 157 question survey was administered to 300 children between the ages of ten and thirteen, in and around Boston, Massachusetts. The results of the survey are discussed thoroughly in this chapter. Schor concludes that “American children are deeply enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending and they are getting more so. The more they buy into the commercial and materialist messages, the worse they feel about themselves, the more depressed they are, and the more they are beset by anxiety, headaches, stomachaches and boredom” (p. 173)

In chapter 10 Schor offers suggestions on ways we can decommercialize childhood, including: becoming involved in enacting legislation which would more highly regulate advertising and the media; becoming aware of the types of advertising taking place in schools; and becoming more aware of commercialization in the home and offering alternatives when needed.

Evaluation

Juliet Schor’s *Born to Buy* is a thought-provoking book. The reader is led through a wealth of citations from previous research in the field. Schor adds to this research her personal observations from interviewing professionals in the field of advertising and the surveying middle school students. She also included information from her perspective as a mother of two young children.

Family and Consumer Sciences professionals will find this book to be very informative and useful. *Born to Buy* is enjoyable to read. The reader is provided background information on the very complex subject of the commercialization of children. Someone with no knowledge of this subject can follow the format of the book and the statistical study that is described in the book.

Overall, *Born to Buy* is a very good book. One comes away with the feeling of needing to be aware of the many avenues that are being used to market products to children and the need to become involved in helping to safe guard our children.

About the Author

Debbie Johnson is an associate professor at Southeastern Louisiana University. Debbie received her Doctorate from Louisiana State University in Vocational Education and her Masters from LSU in Vocational Home Economics Education. Debbie has 12 years of experience at the secondary level.