

Summary of organisational responses to the call for evidence

The combination of 'the commercial world' and 'children's wellbeing' could have invoked an impossibly broad range of concerns. In practice, however, the concerns raised cluster around a relatively narrow set of issues. In this paper, we've tried to map these out, in a sequence running from the general to the particular.

Few of the submissions really count as 'evidence' in their own right. Some of them refer to evidence, but most represent opinions or viewpoints. As might be expected, many of them are directly or indirectly oriented towards promoting or forestalling specific policy outcomes. The focus here is on mapping out the range of concerns and issues raised, rather than assessing the evidence itself. The main body of the report deals with the assessment of the evidence contained in the submissions.

This call for evidence was not framed by specific questions, as we wanted organisations to submit evidence held that they considered the assessment panel should be made aware of. Many of the responses received have been published by the submitting organisations.

1. Obesity

The most strongly represented concern in the submissions relates to obesity. The lines of debate on this issue are well-known. There is clearly a continuing, co-ordinated campaign to further strengthen regulations on the advertising of HFSS foods, both by extending it to a complete ban prior to the 9 p.m. watershed and by somehow applying it to non-broadcast media. It is also worth noting that some submissions made specific reference to infant feeding although the advertising in question here is aimed at adults.

Several submissions used terms like 'manipulation', 'seduction' and 'exploitation', and binary distinctions between healthy and unhealthy, responsible and irresponsible. There was good evidence here that advertisers are using a range of strategies to reach children – and perhaps even 'bombard' them; yet when it came to identifying the effects of these on children only one study was routinely cited.

The response on this issue from industry was generally to claim that existing restrictions are sufficient, and that companies follow policies of corporate social responsibility.

2. Sexualisation and body image

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This issue was raised in several submissions, although it was by no means as dominant as the obesity issue, and the evidence in support of it was also much less plentiful. A range of related issues clustered together here: sexual abuse and paedophilia; gender stereotyping; the effects of pornography; unsafe sexual practices; the corruption of childhood innocence; and so on. Some of these are quite specific, while others are much more general; some concern particular illegal or risky behaviours, while others are more to do with overall attitudes; some potentially apply to everyone, while others relate to events that may be relatively rare. Some the evidence cited was anecdotal: Tesco's marketing of a pole-dancing kit for children (cited by several submissions) cannot be seen to amount to evidence of a wholesale 'sexualisation' of childhood.

Of all the issues raised in the submissions, obesity and body image were the most forcefully expressed.

3. Public and private

There was a general concern in several of the responses about what is seen as the commercialisation of the public sphere, or of public services. This applied primarily to broadcasting and to education. In both cases, the argument was that the public good is somehow necessarily undermined by the encroachment of commercial forces.

In terms of media, this was most apparent in one defence of public service broadcasting, which argued that advertising-funded media impoverish cultural value, undermine citizenship, and reduce the public good to questions of commercial logic. This can be set against the arguments of industry bodies who argued that commercial involvement funds the provision of public service media, guarantees plurality, etc. One response made a useful distinction here between commercially-driven messages and commercially driven decisions about what children should be provided with.

In terms of education, the critique was most apparent in some of the responses of education professionals, although the strongest critique of marketing in schools in fact came from one of the breastfeeding action groups. There was an assumption here that any kind of commercial involvement in schools is by definition wrong: but there was no sustained evidence about its implications in terms of children's learning. These arguments can be set against the responses of commercial companies working in education, who typically presented this as a matter of 'partnership', and were keen to stress their social responsibility.

4. Materialism, happiness and wellbeing

At a relatively general level, there was a set of concerns about commercial influences resulting in distorted values and beliefs. Several submissions

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argued that children today tend to define relationships with family and peers in materialistic terms, that they have a 'throwaway attitude', that they expect instant gratification, that they have 'warped values', that they are 'spoilt', and so on. There is a strong element of broader cultural pessimism about this argument – as when we were told that advertising 'cheapens life itself'. Accompanying this were concerns about 'happiness' – a generalised belief that, while consumption might offer short-term gratification, in the long term it contributes to us all feeling miserable. This was frequently buttressed by claims about the impact of commercial forces on children's mental health – the rise in various mental disorders (such as depression and ADHD) and in behaviours such as binge drinking, drug-taking, suicide, and so on.

This contrasts with a rather weakly expressed argument in the submissions from commercial organisations that children's lives are actually getting better as a result of commercial forces. Thus, it was argued that children today have more opportunity and choice, that commercial media contribute to children's learning, and that there are also benefits in terms of entrepreneurship and economic well-being. These arguments were made in relation to a broad range of media.

Several submissions asserted that children and parents from more economically deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience commercial pressure, and hence to suffer damaging consequences, than children from less deprived backgrounds.

5. Misleading marketing

There was a concern in several submissions about the fairness of advertising and marketing to children. This issue raised several questions about children's understanding of persuasive intent. Typically, those opposed to such advertising claim that children do not become aware of persuasive intent until about the age of twelve; while the advertisers put this age much younger, at around seven or eight, or even less. Both sides adduced different research evidence in support of their arguments.

This issue took on further force when it came to new media. Some respondents drew attention to the range of 'stealth marketing' techniques used in non-broadcast – and particularly online – media. These include techniques such as product placement, advergames, viral marketing, sponsorship and celebrity endorsement; as well as 'integrated marketing' (or 'spin-off' merchandising) more broadly. Such techniques were seen as much more pervasive, and in some cases much less overt and visible, than conventional advertising, and hence as more deceptive and more powerful.

In a sense, this is a concern about process rather than outcome – about how marketers are seeking to reach and persuade children, rather than with the outcomes of this in terms of well-being.

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Concern was expressed in a number of responses about privacy aspects here, for example in relation to data-mining. To what extent are children more vulnerable here, as compared with adults? How far and in what ways do companies actually use the data they gather, for example from social networking sites? And what are the consequences of their use of that data in terms of well-being, beyond the receipt of annoying spam messages?

6. Inappropriate content and contact

Several of the submissions carried over concerns addressed in the Byron Review about 'inappropriate' content (notably pornography on the internet and violence in video games) and contact (paedophilia, cyberbullying).

It is important here to differentiate between general concerns that arise from children's engagement with media and technology and those that relate specifically to the commercial dimensions of this. Most of the concerns about contact have been taken up in ongoing work around internet safety; and Byron also addressed many of the issues relating to content (sex and violence).

7. Effects on family and peer group relationships

This overlaps to some extent with area 4 above, and involves a set of concerns about the harmful impact of commercial forces on interpersonal relationships. Implicit historical claims are frequently made here about how the exposure to the commercial world has made family and peer-group relationships more difficult.

In terms of peers, this is about bullying and 'peer pressure' more generally: to what extent are children likely to be abused or excluded from friendship groups because they don't have the 'right' consumer goods, wear the 'right' labels, etc.?

In terms of family, it is about 'pester power', and more generally about parents' feeling of obligation to provide their children with the appropriate consumer goods (and guilt when they cannot). Marketers agreed that children do exercise a significant influence on family decision-making; but argued that this was not necessarily a negative thing, and was not necessarily a matter of 'pestering'. They also argued that there is a risk that presenting the issue in this way ignores parents' involvement (or complicity) in their children's consumption. And they claimed that strategies based on encouraging 'pester power' are strictly regulated.

8. Other

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Some of the submissions reflected much broader debates about the kind of society we want and the ills of the modern world. However, there were also some other specific concerns, including:

a. Children's employment

One submission drew attention to this aspect of children's relation with the commercial world, focusing primarily on legal regulation, safety issues and the like.

b. Representations of young people

This was an issue raised by youth groups and relates mainly to the coverage they receive in news media rather than traditional commercial messages.

c. Media education

Many of the submissions – particularly those from educational organisations and from industry – pointed to the potential role of media literacy education (as an area in its own right, or as an aspect of citizenship or PSHE). Significantly, those campaigning for stricter regulation generally dismissed this as a distraction.

9. What children and parents think

Several of the submissions presented evidence, of various kinds, about 'what children and parents think'. Several of the respondents had employed surveys or focus groups as a means of representing the opinions of these groups, which were sometimes comprised of their own members.

Some of these surveys showed clear differences between children and adults, and between older and younger adults. The children did not see themselves as significantly at risk from commercial pressures, and there were differences between older and younger adults, with younger adults generally adopting more relaxed and liberal attitudes on most issues.

Introduction

This report has been based on 35 responses to the consultation document.

As some respondents may have offered a number of options for questions, total percentages listed under any one question may exceed 100%. Throughout the report, percentages are expressed as a measure of those answering each question, not as a measure of all respondents.

The organisational breakdown of respondents was as follows:

Parent of a child aged 0-7	11
Parent of more than one child	8
Parent of a child aged 8-11	6
Parent of a child aged 16-18	4
Other*	3
Parent of a child aged 12-15	3

**Those which fell into the 'other' category included an educator, a future parent and Hampshire Children and Families Forum.*

The report starts with an overview, followed by a summary analysis of each question within the consultation.

Overview

Respondents' views were mixed on the impact of the Commercial World on children's well-being. While some respondents thought that there were some benefits or positive aspects to be had from associating with the Commercial World, other respondents were of the opinion that there were very few benefits and commented on the more negative aspects.

Summary

Q1a) What do you think is good about the adverts your children see?

There were 28 responses to this question.

Main findings:

13 (46%) said that they found the adverts to be a useful source of information, which provided them with an awareness of what was available on the market. Others said that adverts were a functional source of ideas for things to do, or places to visit etc.

Assessing the Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing – Summary of Parent's responses

Respondents remarked that good adverts encouraged children to explore their surroundings and the environment, or promoted knowledge of global issues or charity appeals. They also liked the fact that some adverts encouraged healthy eating.

Q1b) what do you think is bad about the adverts your children see?

There were 30 responses to this question.

Main findings:

Respondents commented on the negative side of adverts seen by children, these were:

13 (43%) felt that adverts were largely manipulative, and thought they managed to create a need, or convince the child that they needed or could have the product. There was also the view that some advertisements affected children's perceptions, for example - by implying they would be better at football, if they bought certain trainers. 12 (40%) were concerned about adverts which promoted sugary or high fat foods. Respondents said that adverts of this nature mislead children into believing that these foods were good for them, whereas respondents felt that they encouraged an unhealthy choice in diet. Examples of the types of food mentioned were - breakfast cereals which were covered in sugar or chocolate, or manufactured or processed foods such as 'cheese strings'. 7 (23%) were of the opinion that some adverts made children pester or harass their parents for the item. Some commented that they felt pressurised into buying the product, and there was the view that some parents felt they had to buy the item in order to 'keep up' with peers. 7 (23%) thought that some advertisements had a negative affect on children's perceptions, as they felt they created a 'need/greed' or an 'I want' culture. Respondents were concerned that children were influenced into believing that they should have more and more, and were left feeling dissatisfied, unhappy or vulnerable if they were unable to have the product.

Q2a) what do your children like about shopping?

There were 28 responses to this question.

Main findings:

Respondents gave their opinion on what their children liked best about shopping, these were:

18 (64%) said that their children liked getting or buying the items they wanted, and spending money on things for themselves. 10 (36%) commented that their children liked to help them to shop, for example by finding or weighing items, or writing shopping lists. They also liked to be involved in choosing products, or having a role in deciding what to buy. 9 (32%) believed that they liked looking at toys or other items of interest, and browsing in shops for the products.

Q2b) what do your children dislike about shopping?

There were 29 responses to this question.

Assessing the Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing – Summary of Parent's responses

Main findings:

12 (41%) said their children disliked the time consuming aspects associated with shopping, e.g. searching for products, or standing in queues etc. 7 (24%) remarked that their children did not like being denied the item, and that 'not getting what they wanted' or not getting their own way, was what they disliked most about shopping.

Q3 Apart from adverts in magazines and on television are there any other ways companies get in touch with your children? Please tell us more in the box below.

There were 34 responses to this question.

Yes 27 (79%) No 4 (12%) Not Sure 3 (9%)

Main findings:

The top issues identified by respondents were:

12 (35%) mentioned that companies got in touch with children through school. Some respondents disapproved of this, particularly where companies targeted schools and children through promotion of offers such as 'box-tops' or other vouchers. Others said that children sometimes received flyers or mail-outs from local places, via school. 11 (32%) commented on the internet, and various methods used to connect to advertising via pop-ups or search engine links etc. 8 (24%) respondents quoted Bill-boards as a means of advertising. 7 (21%) said that companies contacted them via e-mail (including spam and junk emails), and a couple of respondents mentioned that they had to be vigilant in checking messages and in ensuring that they ticked any 'no further information' boxes.

Q4 Do your children ask them to buy them things because they have seen them on television or other media? Please tell us more in the box below.

There were 34 responses to this question.

Yes 32 (94%) No 1 (3%) Not Sure 1 (3%)

Main findings:

The following issues were identified by respondents:

7 (21%) stated that their children asked them to buy them things they had seen on television, with some respondents saying that they asked for items connected with children's programmes or TV characters. 4 (12%) said they had been asked to buy toys after their children had seen them advertised. 4 (12%) said that yes, their children did ask them to buy them things they had seen on TV or other media, and that this had lead to discussion between them and the child.

Q5 Do your children ask you to buy them things you would not normally buy because of commercial pressure? Please tell us more in the box below.

There were 33 responses to this question.

Assessing the Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing – Summary of Parent's responses

Yes 26 (79%) No 3 (9%) Not Sure 4 (12%)

Main findings:

The main topics identified here were:

4 (12%) felt that children were influenced by their friends and that peer pressure also played a part in what children asked their parents to buy them. 4 (12%) remarked that their children asked for the latest fad/trend item, or branded items such as clothing, or 'Bratz' type dolls etc. 4 (12%) said that their children asked for items promoted by TV, or programme related merchandise. 4 (12%) said that their child might ask for a product but they did not buy it.

Q6 At what age do you think children should be allowed to make decisions about what they buy?

There were 27 responses to this question.

Main findings:

Respondents commented on issues surrounding the age that children should be allowed to make these decisions. These were the main areas discussed:

8 (30%) thought that children need support in making independent decisions, and that the parents' role was to guide the child in making sensible choices. They felt that parents should empower their child to make decisions, but should set ground rules or maybe hold the final decision over what was bought. 7 (26%) thought that children should be introduced to this from an early age, some mentioned that they had allowed a degree of decision-making at around three or four years of age. 7 (26%) agreed that this should be when the child had saved up or earned enough money to buy the product. Respondents said that children should either save their pocket money, or do jobs around the house to earn the money, or spend their own birthday/gift money etc.

Q7 how have the commercial messages your children receive changed over time?

There were 13 responses to this question.

Main findings:

5 (38%) said that advertising had become more targeted now, and was aimed specifically at an intended audience i.e. children, the gender-split, or age-groups, and mentioned that some adverts were based on the consumer's previous spending information on the internet. 5 (38%) thought that the adverts were more 'aggressive' or pushy than ever before.

Q8 what benefits do your children get from engaging with the commercial world?

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There were 23 responses to this question.

Main findings:

Respondents commented on what they felt were the main benefits, these were:

9 (39%) thought that the commercial world provided their child with the opportunity to learn about making choices or making informed decisions, and forming opinions.

7 (30%) respondents felt that there was little or no benefit for children in engaging with the commercial world.

Q9 Are there any other comments you would like to make?

There were 14 responses to this question.

Main findings:

Respondents commented on other relevant issues, these being:

9 (64%) believed that more control was needed over advertising, with some respondents stating that advertising aimed at children should be stopped. A few respondents said that a percentage of the advertising should be for nutritious foods, or hold more positive messages such as anti-smoking or anti-bullying campaigns.

5 (36%) felt that pressure was put on parents to buy items, leading them to go against their ethics, or to 'give in' when making decisions on whether to buy. They felt it was hard for parents to resist their children's demands, and that parents were made to feel they were competing with other parents as well as their child's peers.

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The organisational breakdown of respondents was as follows:

A parent responding on behalf of children and YP	11
Aged 12-15	5
Aged 19-25	5
Aged 16 -18	3
An organisation responding on behalf of children and YP	3
Aged 8 -11	1
Other*	1

**This respondent wished to remain anonymous.*

Respondent information questions:

Are you:

Female	24 (83%)
Male	5 (17%)

Where do you live?

England	29 (100%)
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The report starts with an overview, followed by a summary analysis of each question within the consultation.

Overview

There were mixed views on the impact of the Commercial World on children's well-being. Whilst many respondents said that advertising provided positive messages to young people (YP), and gave them easy access to useful and constructive information, others were very negative, and believed the amount of advertising was excessive and overly persuasive.

Summary

1 a) What do you think is good about the advertising you see?

There were 26 responses to this question.

Key themes

9 (35%) respondents believed that advertising showed the consumer what was available in the market place, and that they had a varied choice which enabled them to make informed decisions. 9 (35%) said that they found adverts to be a useful source of information, and helped to endorse a healthy lifestyle. Respondents mentioned that adverts which promoted valuable safety messages such as the 'drink sensibly' messages on alcohol adverts, and raising awareness on child abuse issues were particularly useful.

8 (31%) said that many adverts were funny and entertaining, as they were created using humour, were colourful, eye catching and captured their interest. 7 (27%) were of the opinion that nothing or very little was good about advertising. 6 (23%) believed that how adverts were put together, for example by using music and catchy phrases and tunes was extremely good.

1 b) What do you think is bad about the advertising you see?

There were 27 responses to this question.

Key themes

15 (56%) believed that there was far too much advertising, and the amount of advertising on children's TV, especially around Christmas time was excessive. Respondents believed that it was essential to control the amount of advertising to consumers. 14 (52%) thought that adverts were very manipulative and encouraged consumers to buy all the latest products. They said by being repetitive, adverts became overly persuasive and made YP believe they wanted or even needed those products. 13 (48%) said advertising sent out the wrong messages and values, making YP think that by owning these products they would become more acceptable, or fit in with better with their peers.

7 (26%) said that advertising was misleading and untruthful, and the products were rarely as good as they were portrayed in the advert. 6 (22%) suggested that adverts for beauty products, which were targeted at young girls and women were particularly bad. Respondents thought these adverts were bad influences as they depicted underweight models that were always glamorous, and made young girls believe that was how they had to look and dress. 3 (11%) said the repetitive tunes and jingles played during the advert got 'stuck in your head'.

2 a) What do you like about shopping?

There were 25 responses to this question.

Key themes

