

# Alternatives to Enculturation of Children into Consumers

Madalina Balau

# Purpose of the study

- This study is a first attempt to compare features of the communist childhood with consumer culture childhood.
- The aim for this consists in finding the good lessons from the past and use them in our present, but also to stop taking for granted to achievements and developments in childhood and integrate all that recent fast changes have taught us about ourselves.
- In my study I favor the subjective perspective and my findings could have value in individual subjective lives, not at a national economy scale.

# This presentation

- 1. Perspectives on childhood, communism and consumer culture;
- 2. Communist childhood – subjective perspective
- 3. Consumer culture childhood – subjective perspective
- 4. Ideas for a childhood outside consumerism

# Childhood in communism

- Children were a special “brick” in building the “New Man” in communism;
- At first, communism put accent on schooling, in the context of an archaic society which still perceived the child as a working hand in the household and afterwards a wage-earner.
- The Pioneer Organization was important for organizing the principles of socialization.
- The egalitarian practice meant a uniformity practice at child level, impairing self-esteem and creativity, conveying the message that individuality isn't valuable.
- A kind of duplicity in thinking and behaviors was nurtured during those time, influencing children's development and their moral judgement.



# Children as consumers



- Taking the development psychology perspective, initially, children were viewed as vulnerable and influential in the consumer and market context.
- Childhood studies in consumer culture started to gain grounds due to their capacity to introduce new products into the household.
- The UN Declaration for Children's Rights, adopted in 1989, lead to the recognition of the child as a complete person viewed as active and knowing agent in the market.
- The power of children on the market was thus increased by marketing practitioners.

# Children as consumers - continued

- “Kids do have needs that *must* be satisfied. In fact, as far as we know these are the same needs as those of adults. Given the chance, the child will select products and services that best satisfy their needs. (McNeal, 1992, p.89, emphasis in original).”
- The rising contemporary cultural dominance of “kid kustomer”
- Thus, we find ourselves with two polar opposites: those concerned by the impact of media and the commercial world posit children as vulnerable and need of protection; the polar opposite is conceptualization the knowing, relatively competent child.

# Methodology

- In-depth interviews were used with respondents that are today parents of children (under 18) and that spent at some years of their childhood in communism
- 10 respondents participated in this study, 7 females and 3 males.
- Interviews on average were one hour long; questions aimed identifying good and bad aspect in both childhoods and to compare ideas a aspirations and control (over education, life choices, etc.).
- Even though impossible to generalize, the findings highlight subjective perspective of life as a child, identifying subtle differences and verbalizing some of deep the understandings that are left silent in the noise offered by statistics.

# Perceived Communist Childhood

- Good things: many friends in the neighborhood, freedom, play without any concern for television, good reads, an extended family that found time to meet around Sunday lunches;
- Bad things: staying in line for buying things, lack of information, narrow minded adults consumed by fear, playground in really bad condition.
- Childhood aspirations for adulthood: not so many remember if they had any; the few have chosen in the end professions that could make them gain money and not starve, taking the smaller risk.

# Current transformation of childhood

- Good things:
  - many material objects, new and beautiful toys, good clothes, own room, access to good books, good music and good films;
  - access to varied experiences, possibilities for travelling;
  - more open-minded communication with adults and educators.
- Bad things:
  - the omnipresence of screens in children's lives;
  - friends are fewer and harder to reach;
  - family members are hard to reach as well, and the extended family became almost inexistent in child's life;
  - life seem to be more but each is more restricted in the way you can participate to it;
  - less childhood freedom.

# Lessons from both childhoods

- More goods and more experiences impair freedom, even though we are sold the opposite idea;
- The growth ideal is present in everyday life as well, with more pressure on parents and children.
- Parents would like for their children to experience the freedom of playing they had, also the simple life in countryside, closer to nature and the socialization within the extended family.
- Boredom seems to be an enemy today, parents and children being eager to chase it away with technology.

# Conclusions

- Having more choice options and a consumer voice doesn't seem to be perceived as freedom, as long as time and space are not actual places where can be exercised.
- Parents are aware that offering many goods and many activities doesn't always contribute to their children's wellbeing.
- However a simpler life, or just giving up the superfluous, doesn't come up as an idea yet, as the consumer culture narratives are too loud and the inner voice noticing the wrongs too thin.
- So, the ideas that life could be better with less should simply be mentioned more and real examples and experiences be available.