BSMC member Fiona Spotswood is working on a paper with Professor Agnes Nairn exploring the practice of children’s consumption. The data were interviews with over 200 8-14 year olds from the UK, Spain and Sweden. The children were asked about what was important to them; their favourite ‘things’; how they negotiate with parents to get gifts and pocket money; how much time they spend with their parents and what kind of clothes and toys the ‘cool’ group has at school.

Full insights from the analysis will be in the paper. However, the process of becoming embedded in literature around consumerism, materialism and the impact of marketing on children has led to some particular insights about the role of social marketing in behaviour change.

Against a backdrop of marketers’ access to children through their largely unrestrained access to vast, fragmented on- and offline media, it has been well established that the commercialisation of childhood is damaging. ‘Holding materialistic values’ has been linked with low life satisfaction, depression and low self-esteem. And marketing targeting parents (to buy more and earn more) also influences children as their parents are around less, buy more gifts to compensate and children’s free time is spent more often in front of an ‘electronic babysitter’.

Some governments have responded to increasing children’s materialism with bans on children’s TV advertising (in Sweden, Quebec and Norway), but others continue to cite the ‘freedom of capitalism’ in their bid to protect influential big business from regulation. Despite UNICEF UK’s findings that children in the UK feel trapped in a ‘materialistic culture’ and are ranked bottom in terms of child well-being compared to other industrialised nations, our own government are regulation-averse. (This has been shown most recently by their failure to stand by promises to impose a minimum unit price on alcohol despite the ample evidence for its effectiveness.)

For social marketers, this is an important backdrop to our behaviour change work. Despite some, *e.g.* Hastings, arguing that ‘critical marketing’ (the critique of commercial marketing and its influence on culture, society and behaviour) should form half of what social marketers do, commentary and research around critical marketing is largely absent from social marketing journals and conferences. Yet, against this backdrop where commercial marketing has an incredibly strong influence over our behaviours, values, habits and culture, it is clear that a collective critique around commercial marketing must be a key aspect to social marketing.

What is known is that commercial marketing has enormous budgetary power, little regulatory constraint and enormous influence over specific behaviours (*e.g.* alcohol consumption) and more general cultures and values (*e.g.* materialism). Social marketers working hard to combat behavioural problems must look to the commercial context of these behaviours for understanding. Social marketers may feel powerless, but it is essential that powerful interdisciplinary coalitions are built for behaviour change. The time for solo and silo activities is over.


