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 Final Presentation Paper  
 Fan Culture – Prof. Rehak  
 April 25, 2008

**The Thinning Line between Fandom, Consumerism and Citizenship:**  
 Nickelodeon, *SpongeBob Square Pants*, and the Youth Consumer Culture

In this paper, I would like to explore the blurring of fan practices with the accepted consumer identity through a discussion of the growing youth consumer culture. Also, throughout this brief study, I will argue that media producers are purposefully cultivating fans out of their young audiences in order to satisfy their own capitalist desires. Therefore, I believe there is a connection between the process of infantilization – that Benjamin R. Barber introduces in *Consumed* – and the current growing acceptance of the adult fan. To address these issues, I will begin with a short introduction to the existing scholarship on youth consumer culture – which is almost entirely situated outside of fan studies. Then, I will provide examples from Nickelodeon to showcase how the youth consumer culture is a prime location for the blending of the fan identity with the consumer's role and the practices of citizenship to create the new level of consumerism that we see taking over today.

Critical analyses of the growing youth consumer culture express the mounting societal anxieties that surround the recent increase in the marketing towards children. Yet, instead of focusing on the relationship between children and the media, these works concentrate heavily on the role of the producer, the content of the messages, and the economics of the burgeoning market. In *Consumed*, Barber criticizes our society's consumer-based capitalism for corrupting our cultural ethos and for associating capitalism with vices that "undermine democracy, responsibility, and citizenship" (5). Specifically, he connects the "infantilization" of our media and citizens with the overproducing capitalist structure that is constantly in search of new markets in this global economy. With sixty percent of the world's consumption being done by adults in the First World and without the world's poor gaining a disposable income, Barber argues that the capitalist cultural producers entice those with money to

excessively shop. The infantilization ethos encourages adults to have a “childlike” dependency on commodities, while it also reduces the tastes of adults and fosters a longing to remain young. In addition, infantilization has solidified a new youth market by targeting the desires of kids and altering the way the society and parents view the necessity of commodities to help the development of their children (Barber).

In *Born to Buy*, Juliet B. Schor further discusses the recent heavy commercialization of childhood in the United States. She cites a study that reveals “more children [in the U.S.] than anywhere else believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status” (Schor, 13). She then continues to quantify this shift, by focusing on the spending power of the young; children between the ages of four and twelve purchased \$6.1 billion worth of goods in 1989 and spent \$30.0 billion in 2002 (Schor, 23). This massive increase has been achieved through corporate strategies that use children as guerilla marketers on their parents. Schor then continues to focus on the content of the commercial messages and the negative social and psychological effects they have on the nation’s young – including media critic Neil Postman’s concept of the “disappearance of childhood”.

The birth of the Nickelodeon Nation provides a great example of “infantilization” and the construction of a brand to create a youth consumer community. Even though the channel premiered in the spring of 1979 – with the original name Pinwheel – and became Nickelodeon in 1981, it did not develop into a formidable brand until 1991 when Nicktoons were created (Sandler, 43). The network provided an alternative to the slim pickings of children’s programming – that only aired during weekend mornings and after-school hours – by focusing on non-violent and non-sexist, educational shows that were targeted for both boys and girls. The network also prides itself on its ability to empower children by giving them their own channel and independent voice (Sandler; Banet-Weiser). Nickelodeon– and associated sister channels like The N – appeals to all age groups because there is specialized programming that varies in genre and style and is catered to each audience, such as: Nick Jr. for

preschoolers; Nictoons for those aged six to eleven; Snick on Saturday evenings; TEENick on Sunday nights; and Nick at Nite for the nostalgic grown-ups who are “young at heart” (Sandler 53).

Nickelodeon’s parent company, the media giant Viacom, builds brand recognition and loyalty through the production of merchandising by their subsidiary holdings (Sandler 55).

Even though the network is seen more for its commercial dominance than for the rebellious personality it once maintained, Nickelodeon is still viewed as “a place where kids can be ‘liberated’ from the ‘real world’” (Banet-Weiser, 98). With the inception of the Nickelodeon Nation brand campaign of 1999-2000, the concept of a youth consumer community was fully recognized. The advertisements – targeted not only to children, but to adults and others in the business – utilized the rhetoric of patriotism and national loyalty to transform the network from a regular television channel to an imagined place, community, and feeling (Banet-Weiser, 94). Yet, Nickelodeon takes the concept of citizenship a step farther than television channel loyalty; not only do children get to exercise their rights when they vote in the “Kids Choice Awards,” during presidential elections the channel has been known to run special programming and news updates.

Today, the Nickelodeon Nation has since been retired, but the internet has provided an entire new outlet for the reinforcement of brand loyalty and consumption. Not only does Nickelodeon provide a highly interactive website with hundreds of games, but they also host the virtual city known as Nicktropolis that is home to over seven million citizens. Nicktropolis mimics many other MMORPG (Massive Multiple Online Role-Player Games) by providing kids with a safe online community to create avatars known as NickSelf, chat with other children, play games, and more ([www.nick.com](http://www.nick.com)).

On the other hand, adults also fall prey to the infantilization ethos that Barber would argue is informing Nickelodeon and Viacom executives. This is clearly seen in the adults that make up around a third of the viewers of *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Hiilenburg, 1999). While *SpongeBob* was not originally targeted towards older age groups, it has become a pop culture favorite. While I do not have the space

to hypothesize why adults specifically enjoy this program, Heather Hendershot speaks about it in great length in her essay entitled “Nickelodeon’s Nautical Nonsense” in which she states “many adults claim to watch *SpongeBob*, conversely, to be less adult.” (Hendershot, 191). This assertion supports the reoccurring fear that “consumerism urges us to retrieve the childish things” that will inevitably deprive our society of mature and responsible grown-ups (Barber, 14 & 19). In addition, the adult viewing of the show and the purchasing of *SpongeBob* merchandising – like boxers and license-plate frames – reflects the complicated paradox of age in the United States as the aging population longs to be youthful and the children constantly try to act older – and are encouraged to do so by much of the media even though it is socially frowned upon.

In a society where patriotism is synonymous with purchasing national products to invigorate our economy, it is no wonder that young consumers, who were historically understood as apolitical, are now given power in the nation’s economy and their well-being is heavily considered in politics. As fandom becomes less about being situated in the margins and more about the mainstream and commercialized practices, the line between fandom and consumerism will disappear and the social and political implications of being a fan may be resituated as characteristics of being an engaged national citizen. Yet, it is unclear if the fan is becoming more commercialized or if the consumer is appropriating the fan experience.

The case study of Nickelodeon I presented here is only the tip of the iceberg of the complicated relationship that exists between children, their fan objects and the role kids play in our society – not to mention the more traditional status adult fans that is also exacerbated by Nickelodeon. And while the authors rarely refer to the Nickelodeon viewers as fans (except for in reference to the adult audience), it is clear that many children do indeed partake in fan practices in their everyday lives; and Nickelodeon breeds children fans through their brand loyalty that is expressed through the amount of money that is spent on Nickelodeon merchandise. While Barber and many of the other critics of the commercialization

of children come from a conservative perspective I do not agree with, I cannot help but be intrigued by the discussion of infantilization ethos. These works also lead me to question the role that these consumerism studies can have on fan studies and vice a versa. Fan studies' focus on the individual can provide a better portrait of the consumer and giving more attention to the youth consumer culture can present a more dynamic picture of fandom. In conclusion, as Henry Jenkins ponders in the "Afterword" of *Fandom*, fandom seems to be the way of the future and today's youth is the nation's first generation from birth that is being institutionally encouraged to participate in fan communities.

### **Nickelodeon Anthem**

(to the hit tune "Iko Iko" by The Dixie Cups in 1965)

2, 4, 6, 8 – SPLAT!!  
 Me and my generation  
 Don't you like kids who look like that  
 Nickelodeon Nation  
 Talk about Hey Now (hey now), Hey Now (hey now)  
 Going to Celebration  
 I believe in Nick 'cause Nick believes in me  
 Nickelodeon Nation!

- Banet-Weiser, 94-95

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