Children are seen as vulnerable consumers, yet little research has considered why they are more vulnerable than adults in an online context. This conceptual article uses an ecological paradigm to explore the underlying mechanisms that bring about vulnerability for children in general and specifically when interacting with online marketer created material. It does this by using the definition of a vulnerable consumer outlined by Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg to focus on how marketing influence creates power imbalance, hinders consumption goals, and affects personal and social perceptions of self, leading children to be vulnerable consumers in online contexts. A social ecological conceptual framework is presented that demonstrates the interdependence of children's vulnerability with the social structure of their environments. Finally, in discussing how marketers are ultimately the agents in control of creating a fair marketplace for children online, policy implications are given.

Children have been identified as a unique group of vulnerable consumers in the online context (Ringold 2005). Due to children being active co-constructors in their childhoods (Tisdall and Punch 2012), while at the same time experiencing developmental deficits (John 1999, 2008), changing concepts of self (Sebastian, Burnett, and Blakemore 2008), and having unique dependence on socialization agents, children have an increased likelihood of experiencing transient state-based vulnerability online that differs from adults or those with other vulnerabilities. Despite this, there are relatively few studies on their vulnerability in marketing and none on their vulnerability in the online marketplace and thus there is little to guide policy on marketer/child interactions in this online context.

John’s (1999) theory of consumer socialization predicts that young children will rely on perceptual characteristics of advertising until around
7, become increasingly analytical between 7 and 11 and by 11–13 be reflective processors, capable of understanding advertising’s persuasive intent. Early research found children recognize advertisements from as young as 3, and are competent at recognizing advertising by 5 years in television environments (Levin, Petros, and Petrella 1982). This supports this consumer socialization framework and the perceptual reliance of young children.

More recent work incorporates theories of mind and executive functioning skills to explain children’s cognitive development in relation to advertising literacy (Moses and Baldwin 2005). This review finds that while children as young as eight may comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising, they may not be able to utilize this knowledge until much later. Evidence from both the traditional and new media environment supports this prediction, finding that high conceptual (cognitive) advertising literacy does not translate to negative brand attitudes (De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet, and Walrave 2017b), reduced pester intent (Neyens, Smits, and Boyland 2017), or decreased purchase requests (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2017; Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016). This was even the case when children’s conceptual advertising literacy was increased via disclosure (De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016).

Children are likely to be intentionally and unintentionally exposed to marketing activities (Brenkert 1998), especially with the advent of the Internet. Further evidence from the online environment finds advertising literacy is impaired in the more cluttered and interactive online environment. Acquisition of this knowledge comes later (at least 14 years) than for traditional formats in terms of their recognition of website and banner advertising (Ali et al. 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, Opree, and Smits 2017a) and conceptual (cognitive) advertising literacy in the context of advergames (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016). Unless children have a critical attitude to persuasion attempts (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016a), most research finds they cannot resist the persuasive influence of online advertising whether they recognize it or not. Marketing that takes advantage of the greater vulnerability of children as online consumers is unfair and unethical, rendering the online context unique to the offline context and in need of further explication which this article seeks to provide.

We thus aim to extend the literature, thinking and policy around the unique context of children’s vulnerability in their interactions with marketers online. We do this through the development of a conceptual framework that combines previous understanding of adult vulnerability
and its current definition (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005), with child specific literature and a hybrid conceptualization of childhood (Spotswood and Nairn 2016), through the lens of social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977). To clearly explicate the conceptual framework and its policy implications, we provide propositions that suggest how the online context increases children’s reliance on marketers, and the effects on both their consumption goals and personal and social perceptions of self-identity. Lastly, we use these propositions to suggest policy recommendations in the area beyond current meager protections.

What follows then is a brief review of marketing literature related to consumer vulnerability for adults and then specifically related to children. Next, children’s consumer vulnerability in the online context is examined using the current definition of consumer vulnerability (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005). Through this process a conceptual framework and its associated propositions are presented. Finally, policy recommendations are provided based on these propositions.

Vulnerability Literature in Marketing

Vulnerability generally refers to susceptibility to harm (Smith and Cooper-Martin 1997). Harm to a person’s welfare may take the form of physical, psychological, social or economic harm due to disadvantage and unequal power in society. Vulnerable consumers are unable to “navigate the marketplace” due to a lack of understanding, knowledge, skills, or freedom to effectively do so (Ringold 2005). However, those that are susceptible or disadvantaged but not harmed, may not always fit within the purview of also being vulnerable (Brenkert 1998), it is the experience of vulnerability that is a necessary condition (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005). On this basis Baker and colleagues updated the definition of consumer vulnerability as

a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products. It occurs when control is not in an individual’s hands, creating a dependence on external factors (e.g. marketers) to create fairness in the marketplace. The actual vulnerability arises from the interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions within a context where consumption goals may be hindered and the experiences affect personal and social perceptions of self. (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005, 134)

While this definition emphasizes vulnerability from the individual state-based perspective, it incorporates the necessary condition of experiencing vulnerability and therefore also accommodates the class-based perspective (Commuri and Ekici 2008), as individual characteristics
are considered. An integrated view is the most useful when systemic vulnerability increases the likelihood of consumer groups experiencing transient vulnerability as is the case for children online. For marketers and policy makers, likely exploitation of systemically vulnerable consumers is of paramount concern (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005; Ringold 1995; Shultz and Holbrook 2009). Consideration of vulnerability from a class- or group-focused perspective is useful for directing protective guidelines and legislation in anticipation of harm, while a solely state-based perspective requires those at risk to experience vulnerability and can therefore be difficult to operationalize for consumer protection (Commuri and Ekici 2008). Commuri and Ekici (2008) highlight that market and policy responses are insufficient if they represent “firefighting” and on this basis advocate utilizing vulnerability models to anticipate both systemic and transient vulnerability.

To accompany this definition, Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005) developed a generalized model of vulnerable consumers that focuses on aspects both internal and external to a person that limit or impede their ability to participate effectively in the marketplace. However, the interactive nature of antecedent influence wasn’t accounted for and McKeage, Crosby, and Rittenburg (2017) expanded the model to incorporate developments on the conceptualization of vulnerability from 2005 until 2017. They include elaboration of antecedent internal and external influences that may reduce or increase vulnerable experiences (Baker and Mason 2012). The internal factors of individual states and characteristics are combined as “individual factors” and external factors are elaborated as macro forces, community, and family influence, and considered to interact in a more fluid manner. The work of Pavia and Mason (2014) is incorporated, which considers the experience of vulnerability, including the consumer’s ability to resolve the vulnerability as well as the duration and stability of the vulnerable state. These important developments increase the applicability of the new model to systemic vulnerability. Finally, the revised model highlights the importance of the active or passive nature of consumer responses (Adkins and Jae 2010) as well as macro responses from business, markets or policy that may hinder or facilitate control by consumers (Baker and Mason 2012).

In considering consumer vulnerability and developing the model, previous literature has considered such vulnerable classes of consumers as the visually impaired (Baker, Stephens, and Hill 2001), illiterate (Adkins and Ozanne 2005), immigrants (Derose, Escarce, and Lurie 2007), those who have experienced a natural disaster (Baker 2009), ethnic minorities (D’Rozario and Williams 2005), and transgender groups (McKeage, Crosby, and Rittenburg 2017), however, these are all adult contexts while
the focus of this paper is on children. Models have moved toward an emphasis on individual, transient, and state-based vulnerability but to guide policy they must also capture the systemic vulnerability that arises as a result of the interactive effect of individual factors and external conditions that lead to vulnerability for children. In addition, short- and long-term negative consequences that may occur for children must be considered to guide market and policy responses that can facilitate control. While the models described are useful, a specific model of children’s vulnerability online is required.

Vulnerability in Children

While parents of young children have been studied as a vulnerable group (Stanton and Guion 2013), there are few articles that explicitly consider children as vulnerable consumers, and those that do tend to take a narrow conceptualization of childhood. Laczniak, Muehling, and Carlson (1995) consider mother’s attitudes to advertising to their children but do not consider the child’s perspective. Ringold’s (2005) article looks at adult’s marketplace literacy with a smaller focus on the development of children’s marketplace literacy, citing John’s review of consumer socialization (1999). These studies align with changes in conceptualization of childhood. which has moved from foundations in developmental psychology and an emphasis on cognitive deficits to an anthropological and sociological perspective. This more recent conceptualization of childhood considers children to be active and knowledgeable consumers (Cook 2009; Tisdall and Punch 2012). While the former definition implies responsibility at a societal level for protection as it classifies children as vulnerable, the latter conceptualization shifts responsibility to the child or their parents and fits a situational state-based vulnerability conceptualization. Spotswood and Nairn (2016) argue that neither perspective adequately captures children’s consumer vulnerability.

Many points in the child consumer socialization process represent points of vulnerability, but may be especially relevant to children’s individual characteristics, such as their cognitive development, or to individual states such as mood or life transitions (such as the onset of puberty). Changes occur well into puberty in children’s behavioral responses, such as their cognitive control of behavior (Luna et al. 2004), risk taking propensity (Gardner and Steinberg 2005), and social perspective taking (Choudhury, Blakemore, and Charman 2006; Selman 1980) and researchers have identified cognitive development and perspective taking to be related to their consumer behavior (John 1999, 2008). In addition, individual characteristics and states are likely interrelated as changes in development coincide...
with life transitions such as puberty. When these individual factors are combined with certain external conditions and contexts (such as socializing influences) as described in the definition of vulnerability (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005; McKeage, Crosby, and Rittenburg 2017), children will experience vulnerability. It is the interaction of all these aspects that make children a special group of vulnerable consumers, different from other vulnerable groups who are new to the internet or who have little experience with the Internet; therefore, they are a group who are particularly vulnerable to marketers.

In recognition of children’s uniqueness both individually and in relation to their structural worlds, Spotswood and Nairn (2016) propose three important conceptual underpinnings for understanding children’s consumer vulnerability that align with this perspective. These include the conceptualization of childhood via a hybrid model that highlights the interdependent relationship between agency and social structure, an emphasis on multidisciplinary psychological, anthropological and sociological perspectives to study children’s vulnerability; and use of innovative research methods that go beyond adult-defined interpretations of “children’s voices.”

Commuri and Ekici (2008) identify children using the Internet as a particularly vulnerable group that is worthy of research. Much focus on the vulnerability of children online has been on safeguarding children against online sexual predators (Freeh 2015; Livingstone and Palmer 2012; UNICEF 2011) rather than marketers, though marketers spent over £7.2 billion on digital advertising just in 2014 (IAB 2015a). Recent reports have called for digital literacy programs including education around social media use and rights (Children’s Commissioner 2017). Compounding the issue, the numbers of children online is staggering. Up to 90 percent of children under the age of two have a digital footprint with 66 percent of children aged 3–5 years being able to play online games. Although Facebook does not allow minors (under 13 years) to register, over 20 million of its users are under 16 (Post 2014).

Online contexts differ from traditional marketing contexts because of the introduction of Web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 refers to Internet technology that facilitates user-generated content, collaboration between users, and social networking (Grabner-Kräuter 2009). In addition, the technology allows collection of personal profile information via these social networks (Cachia, Compañó, and Da Costa 2007) that can potentially be misappropriated by marketers to target children. As a result, marketing and branding practices toward children have changed (Nairn, Griffin, and Gaya Wicks 2008), and with the proliferation of social media platforms as part of Web
2.0 developments, marketers connect with children in new ways (Lindstrom 2003) without restriction on time or place.

In the online context, Lwin et al. (2012) consider children’s vulnerability in relation to privacy and information disclosure to marketers, while Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen (2012) find that children respond differently to new marketing techniques online. In general, there is lower advertising literacy in the new media environment than the offline environment. The acquisition of this knowledge comes later than for traditional formats in terms of recognition of website and banner advertising (Ali et al. 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, Opree, and Smits 2017a) and cognitive advertising literacy in general when exposed to advergames (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016). Online advertisements in both websites and banner ads are more difficult for children to recognize than television advertisements (Ali et al. 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, Opree, and Smits 2017a). However, conceptualizations of how vulnerability surfaces for children online through marketer influence is sparse. So, while studies show that children are more vulnerable online than offline, this paper seeks to fill the gap in the literature on how marketer led online communications lead to vulnerability and how that could be addressed.

A hybrid approach to conceptualization of childhood and hence children’s vulnerability as proposed by Spotswood and Nairn (2016) in combination with Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg’s (2005) definition of consumer vulnerability suggests a research paradigm that considers multilevel influence. Social marketers are increasingly adopting social ecology to acknowledge and explore an individual’s social influences (Brennan, Previte, and Fry 2016; Collins, Tapp, and Pressley 2010; Kemper and Ballantine 2017). The ecological paradigm was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) to study child development and posits that a child must be studied within their social context. Thus his “ecology of human development” (Collins, Tapp, and Pressley 2010, 1,183) is

[the] study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between the growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which settings are embedded.

This article uses the ecological paradigm as a lens to examine the vulnerability of children online, allowing us to extend theoretical thinking in this area and provide recommendations for policy development.

Given the interactive nature of vulnerability between internal and external factors and consumption context, a discussion of children’s unique vulnerability online is now presented using the Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg
(2005) definition in combination with Spotswood and Nairn’s (2016) conceptualization, and an ecological paradigm that provides a conceptual framework of children’s vulnerability online as depicted in Figure 1—the theoretical contribution of this work.

As such, the conceptual framework is a pictorial representation of the following discussion and is shown here before the discussion to aid the reader. As per MacInnis’s (2011) view of conceptual contributions to marketing, the article’s conceptual goal is to explicate currently existing knowledge to delineate a structural conceptual framework (Rossiter 2001). The framework seeks to describe the unique context of children’s vulnerability online and why and how this occurs. This is intended to assist marketers and policy makers to address vulnerability for children in online contexts. Methodologically, this is achieved through logical and deductive
reasoning using current literature in unique ways (MacInnis 2011) and takes a proposition-based style toward theorizing (Cornelissen 2017). With this approach, general cause and effect relationships are proposed, as based on the presented structural conceptual framework. This form of theory development is particularly needed with unstructured, real world problems and does not require specific causal relationships to be explicitly stated (e.g., hypotheses, Rossiter 2001). Here we provide propositions for future research to undertake hypothesis generation and empirical testing instead. However, as per Hunt’s (1971) theoretical schemata, general propositional statements are sufficient on their own to be considered theory as they are systematically related, provide law-like generalizations and can be operationally defined.

A discussion of the potential harm to children in relation to the online context follows. The discussion is divided into Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg’s (2005) definition of the themes of Powerlessness, Hindrance of Consumption Goals, and Effect on Self. We start each section with a proposition to guide the reader through the discussion and link it back to the conceptual framework. The final aspect from the definition—Marketer Control of Marketplace Fairness—will be used to outline the policy recommendations that will impede negative effects detailed in our discussion. The conceptual framework demonstrates the interdependent relationship between these themes, and provides an avenue to explicate policy recommendations for children as vulnerable consumers online.

Powerlessness

Proposition 1: Children are powerless against marketer-controlled online contexts because of their low levels of online marketing literacy and specific developmental deficits that make them different from other vulnerable groups and the offline context.

To be considered vulnerable according to Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg’s (2005) definition, one of the first contributors to vulnerability is powerlessness. In this, powerlessness can be created due to two things, (1) an imbalance of power between marketers and consumers or, (2) from consumption of marketing materials. While points of vulnerability can occur throughout children’s lives (Schor 2004), children may be especially vulnerable during their early development as consumers when socialization is intense. This is because children’s maturation as consumers relies upon their acquisition of a constellation of consumer knowledge and skills gained through interactions with the marketplace (Cram and Ng 1999; John 1999, 2008) while they are still developing cognitively.
From a socialization perspective there are many influential marketplace agents available to children to help them acquire such skills, including peers, parents, television advertising, shopping experiences, and organizations (Dotson and Hyatt 2005). Most commentators find the family to be the most influential agent particularly for younger children (Hayta 2008; Mikeska, Harrison, and Carlson 2017), while older children experience more irrational peer influence (Dotson and Hyatt 2005). Although interpersonal influence has been identified as paramount, more recently the Internet has been identified as a socialization agent among generation X and Y consumers (Barber 2013). Given the individualized nature of such online interactions, these are likely to exert a socializing influence on young consumers in an environment where parents are absent. At any point in children’s journeys to becoming consumers, influential agents are involved in shaping children’s responses to aspects such as consumer brands (Schor 2004), and if these agents are marketers this contributes to a power imbalance.

The ability of children to acquire consumer skills such as understanding the value of money, or using marketplace knowledge such as pricing to help with consumer decision making, depends upon children’s cognitive development and social perspective taking ability (John 1999, 2008). In psychological cognitive terms, children need information processing abilities and the development of memory structures to organize market-related knowledge (Moses and Baldwin 2005). Such structures develop as part of children’s general maturation, relying upon children interacting with their social environment; interactions that create adaptive change to their working knowledge of the world (Moses and Baldwin 2005). The extent of such adaptive change is dependent on children’s level of information processing. Major changes have been identified in information processing ability around 7 years and again around 11 years of age, reaching adult-like ability around age 16 (John 1999, 2008). Opportunities to practice using products and services provide children another way to learn about being consumers (McNeal 2007), and these learning situations are powerful because they foster positive perceptions about the marketplace and associated products and brands (John 1999), and are prevalent in the interactive online environment. Advertising products to children has frequently been criticized for setting unrealistic perceptions of how, for example, girls should look and behave (Pollay 1986), along with advertising’s influence in fostering over-consumption and materialism (Hayta 2008). Advertising sets market-related scenarios for children, and influences children to acquire and use marketing related outputs such as branded products (Lawlor and Prothero 2008).
Children and teenagers are one of the fastest growing groups of Internet users and are encouraged to be online by parents, teachers and schools as well as marketers. In this context interactive content blends marketing and entertainment seamlessly (OECD 1999). As most online space becomes commercial children are unable to escape pervasive marketer influence (Hill 2011) unlike in their offline lives. As children have difficulty discerning the persuasive intent of television advertising, where the distinction between content and advertising is clear, and have difficulty with banner ads and other online advertising (Vanwesenbeeck, Opree, and Smits 2017a, Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet, and Walrave 2017b), they are even less likely to be able to do so when the content is interactive or embedded. Only 40 percent were able to comprehend the persuasive intent of television advertising by 11–12 years (Carter et al. 2011) and children have even greater difficulty discerning nontraditional advertising forms (Owen et al. 2013). Marketers aim to create early brand loyalty and viral spread-worthy content with children’s versions of their products (e.g., Children’s Vogue magazine), humorous advertisements, and use online advergames to target children and create personal relationships between them and the brand-related character (Media Awareness Network 2005). Evidence finds that persuasion knowledge in this context is even more limited than in offline contexts and even when children do have such knowledge, they have difficulty accessing it in the highly involving context of an advergame (Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012).

Power imbalance is evident in the targeting of children as vulnerable consumers with marketing messages and products, especially where harm is caused (Smith and Cooper-Martin 1997). Recent exploratory work found marketer created advertising content in 95 percent of mobile applications that targeted children as young as 12 months to 5 years (Meyer et al. 2019). Another example was the use of child psychologists and anthropologists to study children’s online behavior to facilitate marketers’ targeting, which created a public outcry in 1999 (Russakoff 1999). This practice brought about a statement from the American Psychological Association (APA) stating such practices to be unethical and guiding psychologists away from helping marketers in this way (Kunkel et al. 2004). Risks for children from such targeting include health risks where junk foods and/or alcohol brands are concerned. They may also be unable to differentiate hidden costs and fees within advergames and privacy concerns related to virtual worlds (Kunkel et al. 2004; Lwin et al. 2012; MediaSmarts 2015). Risks to personal privacy are with data collection, risk to personal welfare from cyber bullying and sexual predators, and access to information and products that are not age appropriate relate but a few of the negative effects
of children’s online behavior (Kunkel et al. 2004; OECD 1999; UNICEF 2011).

Consumption Goal Hindrance

Proposition 2: Children use marketer-related interactions via Web 2.0 as learning vehicles.

Proposition 3: Marketer-created learning experiences lead marketers to become opinion leaders for children.

Proposition 4: As opinion leaders and with marketer-created learning experiences, marketers shape and socialize children’s identity as consumers, influencing their consumption goals.

Consumption goals may be hindered in a myriad of ways with children as they are exposed to marketer influence online. Marketers interfere with goals for online behavior and in so doing influence children’s goals for consumption. Children’s consumption goals reflected in their value perceptions are functional, emotional, and social in nature (Williams, Ashill, and Thirkell 2016) reflecting hedonic and utilitarian motivations. The main premise of the following discussion is that because children are using their marketer-related interactions as consumer learning vehicles, marketers have the ability to interfere with children’s consumption goals and that this is amplified in an online environment.

Consumers generally go online to fulfill entertainment, social, and information goals (Lwin et al. 2012). In an online environment, social and entertainment goals are often interactive. What is known about children’s goals for social media use is that they participate so they can interact with their friends (Antheunis, Schouten, and Krahmer 2014), and such interactions involve sharing of ideas and content, creating an identity, and for entertainment (Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010). Children use a range of social media behaviors that enable such interactions, such as agreeing with their friends—using Facebook’s “like” function—or sharing, commenting on, or following social content. Sharing of ideas and content between friends on a social media site helps children strengthen already existing friendships (Antheunis, Schouten, and Krahmer 2014). Older children (12–14 years) are known to use social media to consume and share content with their friends (Lu, Hao and Jing 2016), and simple things such as constructing a user profile can result in children publicly stating their brand preferences (Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016). Children play advergames and participate in online quizzes, and many of these activities form part of brand marketer’s engagement strategies with young audiences
These authors note that the blurred nature of marketing and advertising content embedded into entertainment such as games in the online context, for example, social media, means that children are easily sharing branded content with each other, without knowing. Certainly, marketers actively attempt to engage consumers with their content as part of online social discourse, and such interactions with marketer-controlled content deliberately influences children’s consumer learning, changing their original social and entertainment goals for the use of social media.

In a purchasing context, children’s social consumption goals relate to simply “fitting in,” at younger ages, and the incorporation of symbolic identity at older ages (Williams, Ashill, and Thirkell 2016). On this basis, understanding the symbolic meaning of consumer brands is one area in which children are particularly vulnerable as young consumers. There is a remarkable shift in ability to consider non-perceptual aspects of products between six and 12 years (Barenboim 1981) and this is reflected in understanding of symbolic brand meaning by around eight years of age (Achenreiner and John 2003). Children from grade 2 (around 6 years) have been found to be able to use brands as cues to determine the social status of others (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982), and to build consumer knowledge, which then translates into consumer response by around 10 years of age (Achenreiner and John 2003). As brands are integrated into children’s social discourse online, they have a profound potential to be incorporated into children’s identities, creating and influencing their social consumption goals.

Market-related learning situations, for example, interacting with advertising, help children to interact with brands (Nairn, Griffin, and Gaya Wicks 2008) and traditional television advertising (which now plays online) has a prominent role in exposing children to multiple market-related influences. Advertising is known for its ability to foster the learning and development of consumer-related attitudes, with studies showing for example that children have impressive recall abilities of their content (Maher, Hu, and Kolbe 2006). Similar effects have been demonstrated in an online context with subtle marketing cues embedded in immersive advergames. In this context, brand prominence is found to enhance cognitive responses such as recall and recognition of brands (Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016), influencing affective responses to brands. In this way, marketers may influence consumption goals in children, which may lead to negative consequences such as fostering disinhibition tendencies, for example, by showing young people over-consuming energy drinks using “soft” advertising on Facebook. This soft advertising could help build young people’s harmful consumption
behaviors by mixing alcohol with energy drinks (Jones and Barrie 2009). So, the online environment provides a way for brands to amplify their own content by providing authentic and easily shared material. Once online brand-related material is liked, able to be simply shared, and perceived as relevant, young people will share such content with their networks (Ferguson 2011).

The recently launched YouTube channel for children has been criticized by some for blurring the boundaries between advertising and entertainment video (Dredge 2015). YouTube for Kids as an entertainment platform fits the trend of entertainment content shifting to the Internet (Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010), and is potentially more difficult for parents to monitor especially if children are using mobile devices to stream such content. As with reality programs, a children’s entertainment platform provides marketers with the opportunity to seamlessly integrate entertainment with marketing materials. Product placement, sponsorship, interactive advertising, and advergames are included in these platforms, many of which still contain “ad breaks.” Coupling these approaches with socialization concepts, one can conclude that children will take these interactions with marketing materials as consumer socialization moments that help them form consumption goals.

Effect on Self

Proposition 5: Children will experience negative effects on their developing self-concepts when using marketer-created content for online social exchanges and identity formation.

Not much is known about how children might use social media platforms to interact with influential market-related agents such as consumer brands. What is evident is that children are heavy users of social media sites—for example, 67 percent of UK children aged 12–15 years had an active social media profile in 2013 (Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016). Because of this it is expected that children will follow brands that matter to them, because this could help improve their quality of friendships (Antheunis, Schouten, and Krahmer 2014), especially by following socially significant brands. As previously stated, there is empirical understanding that children use social media to fulfill needs such as interacting with friends, identity creation, and for entertainment (Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016), and these activities are part of what children need to learn as consumers. However, other development milestones affecting their self-identity are also required as enumerated upon below.
For children to fully function as consumers they need to acquire the perspective taking skill called Theory of Mind (McAlister and Cornwell 2010). This development enables children to understand brand symbolism. Such symbolic understanding helps children to make judgments about others based on others’ consumption choices. These judgments are consumption stereotypes in action (Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll 1984), and such symbolic brand understanding helps children develop stereotypes of others based on others’ brand choices. Theory of mind is known to begin developing by around age 2 years (McAlister and Cornwell 2010) with most children possessing it by around age five. While capability in perspective taking emerges, proficiency continues to develop throughout childhood (Choudhury, Blakemore, and Charman 2006). Social perspective taking is thought to emerge in consumer decisions between seven and 11 years (John 1999, 2008) and is beginning to be incorporated in consumer judgments of value around nine years (Williams, Ashill, and Thirkell 2016). On this basis, children may be especially vulnerable at young ages to forming stereotypes (or impressions of others) based upon the consumption choices that others make as well as expectations about their own consumption. This occurs even more so in the interactive environment online than offline.

Children’s social media use includes social exchanges (Antheunis, Schouten, and Krahmer 2014) to gain valued social rewards (Tyrie and Ferguson 2013), for sharing information. The social rewards in their social media exchange relationships occur when, for example, children “like” another’s post on Facebook. The act of “liking” a friend’s posted content is rewarding to the friend, provided the child values the “likes.” Such a social exchange signifies a two-sided, reciprocal process (Emerson 1976), and will be repeated if the child posting the content continues to receive “likes.” But being able to respond to others within social media relationships in such ways is contingent on how social media platforms are constructed, so Facebook, for example, with a social model of friendship (Guille et al. 2013), using directed connections, potentially offers more rewarding connections for children because of the ability to strengthen friendships.

Brands have a presence within these social exchanges as backdrops to shared photos, brand characters embedded into shared games, or as part of children’s profile pictures (Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016). This social exchange of marketer related content culminates in electronic word of mouth for children. Beyond this, it is also a source of social acceptance and influence on their personal and social perceptions of self.

As identity formation is an evolving task for people as they mature (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 2012), it is expected that children use their
social media interactions for materials to update and communicate aspects of an evolving identity, and such interactions will include establishing connections with consumer brands (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016). Brand-related user-generated content on social media strengthens the ties between consumers and brands, and plays a role in improving consumer-brand relationships (Hudson et al. 2016). So, marketer-controlled consumer brands on social media may enjoy powerful positions in children’s social networks and be able to increase their influence on the processes of children’s consumer socialization much more than in offline contexts.

Children appropriate consumer brands to communicate their self-concepts (identity) to others (Chaplin and John 2005). Such self-brand links can be characterized by extreme emotions, for example, hatred of and rejection of Barbie dolls (Nairn, Griffin, and Gaya Wicks 2008) or fascination with and love for the American Girl dolls (Diamond et al. 2009). Individual identity formation is an important aspect of human development (Maalouf 2000), and is strengthened as part of social interactions. Some of these social interactions serve to encourage and strengthen children’s emotional connections with aspects such as consumer brands (Diamond et al. 2009). This is because the development of intense feelings for consumer brands is linked to people’s identity formation, especially the development of the self, and this is a core development task for children (Chaplin and John 2005). Thus, appropriation by children of aspects of consumer brands for their use in self-development is a powerful socialization tool, ultimately enabling children to receive feedback from others about the expression of their self-concept.

The risk here with children and the development task of identity formation is that marketer-controlled outputs may be able to monopolize the sources of online information children are interacting with, thus playing a greater role in shaping aspects of children’s identities than in offline situations. Children appropriating brand-related materials for use in identity formation are undertaking a different activity than that of creating social media content, although both require children to establish connections with consumer brands. Such connections with brands on social media are often un-moderated by adults, leaving the brand marketer in a position of trust and an ability to communicate with children. This trust and access may increase children’s reliance on the brand marketers’ opinion for example about fashion items, or what to do and wear to be perceived as “cool” (Ferguson 2011).

Finally, children using brands to communicate aspects of their identity are vulnerable to negative peer group judgments and ostracism if they
cannot meet purchasing criteria for group inclusion (Roper and Shah 2007). Not being able to identify as part of the “in group” who can afford premium brands, increases children’s vulnerability to peer pressure to conform (Roper and Shah 2007), with negative self-esteem developing much more so than in moderated offline environments.

**DISCUSSION**

The discussion above leads us to a conceptual framework of children’s online vulnerability as a theoretical contribution to the area as depicted earlier in Figure 1. Here we can see that a child, as an online consumer, is enveloped by specific interactive marketer generated strategies that are only possible online. These vehicles influence them in ways that exploit their vulnerable/powerless developmental status. Firstly, to reiterate, a child is different from an adult in their interaction with online content because of their specifically lower levels of marketing literacy and developmental deficits. The interactive vehicles by which marketers seek to influence children in an online context are possible because of the development of Web 2.0 interfaces. They also provide marketer-created marketing literacy education, which in and of itself is biased.

Creation of market learning situations could include online games and simulations of product usage, product placement, and content created for sharing among friends. Marketers might also create closer bonds between their brands and/or brand-related characters through the special properties of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 allows for real-time interaction between a brand and/or character providing real-time feedback and continued and engaging interactive content, making this context different from the offline context. Such two-way communication might elevate a brand to a perceived personal relationship. Thus, in the traditional sense where relatives behaved as key influencers, children now feel closer to a brand or brand character and may then put more weighting on the brand’s recommendations. The result is the brand becomes a trusted opinion leader and source of eWOM for the child.

As discussed, by brands eliciting two-way communication through requests for user-generated content in the form of pictures, videos, or comments, the brand is further elevated in its level of influence. Influence then for children is due to the brand being elevated to a peer within their reference group; thus marketer’s influence on children’s consumer socialization is strengthened and can shape their brand preferences and consumptive
goals much more in an online context. Beyond this, marketer-led development of symbolic brand meaning, potentially including the co-creative aspect of that development from children, may provide a powerfully strong impact on children into the future. Such an impact is not only in terms of loyalty to the brand, but also felt through the give and take of brand co-creation, which may increase the chances that children include aspects of the brand in their own identity formation, and the stereotypes from brands that they use to judge others. Such a give and take relationship can only be facilitated effectively in the online environment through Web 2.0 technologies, making the online environment specifically different from the offline context.

Current Policy Approaches

Resistance from commercial marketers and other stakeholders to regulation of their child-related online activity is likely. However, businesses do have an impact upon children (Crane and Kazmi 2010), so regulating business activities that culminate in known negative impacts within a framework of broader child protection legislation would seem to be a start toward meeting corporate social responsibility.

There are no direct laws related to controlling the interactions between marketers and children on the Internet, although the Children’s Commissioner of the UK has recently called for some level of regulation (Children’s Commissioner 2017). The onus for policing children’s behavior online has largely fallen to parents with online parental guides for protecting children (e.g., Freeh 2015; MediaSmarts 2015). However, the focus of these parental guides has tended to be on protecting children’s privacy or protection from sexual predators rather than the potential harm of marketer-controlled interactions.

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act from the United States is implemented by the Federal Trade Commission and requires companies to gain verifiable consent from parents before taking information from their children. This is for sites targeting children under age 13 specifically. Websites that may inadvertently gain information from children aged under 13 years (e.g., using browsing data collected by cookies installed on the family home computer) need to also seek permission if they are able to identify that the user is in that age group. This focus on privacy does not consider the other harms that a child may experience from being exposed to marketing, however, and had not been particularly effective when first introduced (Federal Trade Commission 2002).
The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) is a self-regulated industry formed set of rules in the United Kingdom and goes further than the US Act. It states that “…any marketing communication must not contain anything that is likely to result in … physical, mental, moral harm [to children] or exploit their credulity, loyalty, vulnerability or lack of experience” (IAB 2015b, 1). While this provides much better guidelines for marketer interactions with children online, we are still left with a vulnerability-inducing situation as marketers are left to self-regulate fairness toward children in an online marketplace. Further, definitions and conditions of what constitutes mental and moral harm, as well as an exploitation of children’s loyalty, credulity, lack of experience and overall vulnerability are not provided. Thus, the framework presented here is needed to identify more specific areas of harm and inadvertent or deliberate exploitation.

In undertaking a discussion and exploration of the specific vulnerabilities of children when interacting with online marketer-generated content, this article provides insights into future policy that is needed in the area. A potential regulatory framework could be created based on the presented propositions to address the different areas of children’s online vulnerability in regard to marketer interaction with children online. What follows then are policy recommendations and implementation examples for each of the propositions presented in this article. While development of policy initiatives could be framed from the perspective of how those with interests in children’s markets can help children avoid consumer vulnerability (Spotswood and Nairn 2016), especially in online contexts, this is not always possible. We present here some examples but acknowledge that more specific policy would then be required for each stakeholder group. For an overview of the policy suggestions please see Table 1.

Policy Recommendations

According to this discussion, Proposition 1 posits that: Children are powerless against marketer-controlled online contexts because of their low levels of online marketing literacy and specific developmental deficits which make them different from other vulnerable groups and the offline context. Therefore, policies should be developed with specific regulations taking account of children’s ages and when they will achieve specific competencies, as well as the online contexts within which children will encounter marketing activities. Children are still developing a theory of mind, social perspective taking, and memory structures, up to the ages of 6
or 7 years, which suggests that marketer’s online communication practises toward these ages and younger should be regulated. As such, this lends itself to the following policy implication:

\[
\text{a) There should be no persuasive online marketing toward children aged 6 years and under.}
\]

Previous research has clearly established the parameters of children’s consumer socialization in psychosocial and cognitive terms. Once children achieve most of the development milestones by the end of puberty, their capacity to distinguish marketer-created material from other, non-persuasive material assists them in making choices about what to pay attention to. Prior to the end of puberty marketer-generated online material targeted at children needs to pass through a series of threshold steps, enabling marketers to discern the extent to which their material may

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions</th>
<th>Policy Recommendations</th>
<th>Implementation Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proposition 1: Children are powerless against marketer-controlled online contexts because of their low levels of online marketing literacy and specific developmental deficits which make them different from other vulnerable groups and the offline context.</td>
<td>a) No online marketing toward children aged 6 years and under. b) Marketing content toward children between the ages of 7 and 14 needs to be assessed by an independent body for harm to self-image and consumption goal hindrance.</td>
<td>Traffic Light System to identify age appropriate marketing content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposition 2: Children use marketer related interactions via Web 2.0 as learning vehicles.</td>
<td>c) Persuasive online marketing content versus social content must be made explicit to children. d) No online marketing of products and services which cause harm to children. e) Mandatory school curriculum on online marketing influences on consumption goals, self-identity, and relationships.</td>
<td>Pop-up warning messages including educational elements and opt-in for continuing to interact with the marketing content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposition 3: Marketer-created learning experiences lead marketers to become opinion leaders for children.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Categorization of products and services, which cause harm to children to be developed but likely to include junk food, energy drinks, and alcohol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposition 4: As opinion leaders and with marketer-created learning experiences, marketers shape and socialize children’s identity as consumers, influencing their consumption goals.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Creation of school curriculum to educate children on marketing strategy and consumer behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposition 5: Children will experience negative effects on their developing self-concepts when using marketer, created content for online social exchanges.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Implementation Examples

Propositions

- a) No online marketing toward children aged 6 years and under.
- b) Marketing content toward children between the ages of 7 and 14 needs to be assessed by an independent body for harm to self-image and consumption goal hindrance.

Implementation Examples

- Traffic Light System to identify age appropriate marketing content.
- Pop-up warning messages including educational elements and opt-in for continuing to interact with the marketing content.
- Categorization of products and services, which cause harm to children to be developed but likely to include junk food, energy drinks, and alcohol.
- Creation of school curriculum to educate children on marketing strategy and consumer behavior.
cause harm. As such, a second policy implication relating to proposition 1 would be:

   b) Marketing content toward children between the ages of 7 and 14 needs to be assessed by an independent body for harm to self-image and consumption goal hindrance.

Deliberate regulation driven by policy would precipitate a review of marketers’ online communication practices and their content targeted toward the youngest children. Online content deemed beneficial for children, arguably such as Club Penguin Island (Disney; https://www.clubpenguinisland.com/) would be submitted and audited for suitability within a traffic light system of regulations, similar to what has been proposed for alerting consumers to ingredients in processed foods such as added sugar.

Practically, this needs to be communicated simply and clearly to children and parents. Development of an industry standard specifying the nature of the online content that marketers can share with younger and older children could be framed using the traffic light system (e.g., green suitable for all ages and online contexts; yellow and red for specified ages and online contexts). Breaches of the industry standard would need to be followed up and penalties applied for non-compliance (Raine et al. 2013). Oversight of such content would provide some level of auditing for well-known (and cooperative) brands but does not solve the problem of the open nature of the internet whereby children can view anything if parental control is bypassed.

As per Proposition 2: Children use marketer-related interactions via Web 2.0 as learning vehicles. Thus, policy regarding the imbalance of power between children and marketers in an online platform needs to take into account the specialized knowledge of marketers. Marketers are well versed in consumption scripts, manipulations, persuasion, and their effects, while children are still learning these. The increasingly sophisticated ability of marketers to hide their marketing materials in online entertainment adds to this power imbalance. Children cannot necessarily recognize that they are being “sold” to online and policy needs to take this lack of knowledge into account specifically. Overall policy recommendations should start with the regulation of the use of “hidden” marketing for children as a first step. Policy specific to the Internet as a vehicle for influence can be aimed at older children, for example, 8-year-olds and on. Such policy needs to be aimed at requiring marketers to clearly distinguish persuasive
online content from other, more social content and leads to the following policy implication:

c) **Persuasive online marketing content versus social content must be made explicit to children.**

Specifically, this should be implemented for marketing through advergames, sponsorship, vloggers, and product placement or spin-off online serials and movies, among other things. While banning such online content is difficult to implement, instead more explicit pre-message warnings may be applied. For instance, marketers could be forced to acknowledge the underlying goal of an online communication and their role in socializing children. Thus, explicit pop-up messages that require an opt-in to continue to view the content could state a message such as: “The following online game is an Advergame which has been created by (company name). An Advergame is a game that also aims to advertise the company who created it to create higher sales or liking of the company.” A message for product placement before a vlogger or online serial could include: “The following show includes product placement which was paid for by (company name). Product placement aims to show you how a product could be used and influence you to also use that product.” As the family is the most influential of socializing agents the message could end with: “Ask your parents about this.” These messages are meant only as rough examples but would need further research as to the most appropriate messages and their effects.

Proposition 3 states that **Marketer-created learning experiences lead marketers to become opinion leaders for children,** and because of their elevated state as opinion leaders, leads to Propositions 4 and 5, which posit that: **As opinion leaders and with marketer-created learning experiences, marketers shape and socialize children’s identity as consumers; influencing their consumption goals,** and that: **Children will experience negative effects on their developing self-concepts when using marketer-created content for online social exchanges.** The use of brand-related content by children to not only form their own self-identities, but to also judge and stereotype others puts some amount of responsibility on the shoulders of online marketers and the industry. Not only do children learn and create identity based on marketer-created content, but it also leads to the way they think and treat others. Race, gender, and class-related learning may fall in some part to commercial entities and presents obligations to society. Social rewards for correct consumption choices are quickly available through social media. When this is done using marketer-created content, it also strengthens the ties between child consumers and brands in the online
context. Children thus need to appropriate online brand-related content to communicate their identity, and this may make them more dependent on an online marketer-sponsored opinion of fashion and trends, thus potentially creating more influence on identity formation from marketers than offline non-commercial sources such as parents.

As such, online marketers are able to influence children’s original social goals related to friendship and peer interaction. Consumption-related attitudes and goals can be added due to brand saturation and social learning based on online marketer-created content such as advergames. Changes to eating patterns and reduction of inhibitions toward consumption of harmful products in young children are just some of the areas identified in our discussion that are of concern. This is especially concerning with “hidden” marketing messages in advergames, online vloggers, and things such as YouTube for Kids, where such social learning from observation may be more apparent. These lead to the following policy recommendations:

\[ d \] **There should be no online marketing of products and services that cause harm to children;**

and,

\[ e \] **There needs to be mandatory school curriculum on online marketing influences on consumption goals, self-identity, and relationships.**

Practical examples for implication \(d\) could focus specifically on regulating content for products and services that cause harm, for example, alcohol, or depicting binge drinking situations as “fun” (imagery promoted on Facebook of parties involving energy drinks and alcohol), or promoting junk food consumption as acceptable via eating competitions and so forth. This would require further research into the categorization of products and services that cause harm to children and some level of agreement between stakeholders. Such a process is acknowledged to be extremely complex and may again need to be led by an external agency.

Lastly, apart from the introduction of warning messages as education for children as suggested above, education programs also need to be provided to even young children on hidden online marketing content. Beyond this, curriculum developed for each stage of child development would need to focus on explaining marketing strategies and their consequences on children’s consumer behavior, their social relationships, their sense of self and identity creation, and development of consumption goals and expectations. Development of such curriculum presents a clear area for
future research for marketing educators along with a cross-disciplinary approach and partnership with child educators.

CONCLUSION

Adding to the body of knowledge on vulnerability, this article has provided a discussion of children as vulnerable consumers in an online environment using the definition of vulnerable consumers provided by Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005). Using this as a starting point, the power imbalances, effects on goals, and effects on self-identity are outlined here, via the areas of the Person, Vehicles, and Influences of marketers in an online environment. The presented conceptual framework provides a theoretical contribution to the area through re-conceptualizing vulnerability literature for the modern day, modern technologies, and combining it with children’s literature to uncover deeper levels of influence than was previously possible through traditional marketing. As such, our discussion provides a set of propositions that embody the differences and effects of children’s interaction with marketers in an online context. Using these propositions, we have also provided five key policy recommendations with examples of how they might be implemented.

Future research on this topic could surround the specific uses children have of social media and their interactions with brands online. Empirical work measuring their level of awareness of “hidden” online marketing messages at different age groups would aid in further development of policy surrounding this issue. The effects of online marketing materials on their goals and self-identity specifically would further help understand the need and areas for concern. Lastly, research on the specific online warning messages needed and their effects would provide a good, practical contribution to the area.

Research into the development of a set of normative ethical guidelines embedded in a code of conduct for marketers interacting with children online could also be a productive step. Such guidelines could be developed in conjunction with marketers involved in children’s markets, with the aim of achieving consensus about protecting children from harmful marketer-led online activity. Critical analysis of specific incidences of online marketer influence such as with specific games or media content would also further knowledge in the area.

Such concern for the vulnerable is especially important in the debate as the interaction between marketers and society are considered. Such potentially unethical and negative effects of marketing on children through an online medium should be a concern for the marketing discipline as
marketers seek to maintain integrity and trust in the profession. Specific policy recommendations have also been provided here and aspects needed for further development of the area. It is hoped that this discussion might bring about a wider understanding for marketers of their effects on children through online interactions with them.

REFERENCES


