Kids’ stuff? Artefacts and consumer culture at primary school age

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The omnipresence of the fidget spinner as a toy and collector’s piece during the summer of 2017 has been a surprising phenomenon, not least for the toy industry. Its global dissemination in the highly industrialized parts of the world has been entangled with different discourses, in video clips on YouTube as well as in journalistic accounts. In my presentation, I will focus on the fidget spinner as an artefact within consumer culture, analysing its material and semiotic structure as well as the practices and discourses it engendered. Thereby, I will outline and discuss methodological considerations and theoretical foundations of an ethnographical study on artefacts and aesthetic orientations of children at primary school age that I am currently undertaking. In this frame, I investigate children’s meaning construction with reference to consumers goods, on the other hand also focusing on how meanings are ”preformed” and specified within a market dispositif of materialities, practices and discourses (which is especially evident i.e. with regard to the issue of gender marketing). Against the background of an ”aesthetisized” society – a term coined by cultural sociologists to describe the historically increased relevance of aesthetic appearance as an ubiquitous measure of value (Schulze; Reckwitz), a tacit knowledge of choice has become crucial for a situated social positioning in consumer culture. Children develop a sense of this ubiquity and construe their worlds and practices with regard to this knowledge not only as an essential (peer-)cultural capital (Bourdieu), but also as an interpretive tool to understand social order in general. By focusing on the fidget spinner as a case study, I will draw on a concept of subjectivation and will question a ”pre-poststructuralist” account of the subject with respect to children. As Daniel Cook has pointed out, the cultural change of looking at children in Western societies during the twentieth century has been fueled by ”the market”, addressing children as legitimate consumers with their very own wishes and longings. Focusing on the fidget spinner as a consumer good and as a toy, I pursue the ambiguities of subjectivation children are dealing with.

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