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How to cite

Setiffi, F. (2014). Introduction. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 6(3), 1-5. Retrieved from http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_1.pdf

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The online version of this article can be found at

http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_1.pdf

Article first published online

October 2014

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Introduction to the Special Section: Consumer Culture, Identity and Processes of Socialization

*Francesca Setiffi**

This monographic issue represents an attempt to begin bridging the gap between scholarship in the fields of the sociology of education and the sociology of consumption (Martens, Southerthorn & Scott, 2004; Schor, 2004; Martens, 2005; Ironico, 2010). In order to approach consumption – as a form of social action possessing meaning (Alberoni, 1964) and an instrument of social communication (Secondulfo, 2012) - as an object of study of the sociology of education, we must first recognize the pervasive presence and influence of consumption on processes of identity formation in contemporary society. Though consumption has always been an object of social communication, just as material culture has always served as an area of symbolic mediation, with respect to the past, the identity construction of the subject is more closely anchored to the world of goods and services. In order to assign a place to consumption among the processes of education and socialization we must first recognize the relationship between consumption and identity and understand the influence exercised by the mass media on the purchase of goods and services. We often learn consumption behavior implicitly through various primary and secondary institutions of socialization. Though there is a growing body of international research on consumer education a sociological approach which addresses the education and socialization of consumers is still lacking.

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With regard to the relationship consumption-identity, different forms of economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1979) at the disposition of the consumer, inform his/her choices and strategies of purchase and the manner in which he/she uses objects, but the trait which all consumers have in common is the need to express their subjectivity through consumption (Sassatelli, 2007). Consumption is a “device” which grants access to forms of recognition and processes of identification and belonging used by all social classes. Its communicative potential is particularly relevant in situations of economic and social inferiority, in which subjects develop consumption strategies aimed at symbolically emancipating themselves from marginalized situations (Bovone & Lunghi, 2009). With regard to consumer society’s impact on purchasing choices, there are now numerous studies that demonstrate the pervasive influence of marketing, and in particular with regard to the world of childhood (Schor, 2004).

From a social history perspective, our contemporary society of consumption, which has employed consumption as a form of social analysis and comprehension, is the result of a “slow revolution” involving “above all the definitive overcoming of poverty by large sections of the population: farmers, workers, and office workers who, able to satisfy their primary needs, could now afford to long for the abundance which glittered in the large department stores windows of the late-1800s”; and in the second place, the consumption revolution was “one of the most important stabilizing factors for the postwar democracies” (Cavazza & Scarpellini, 2010, p. 7). The polarization between scholars who on the one hand see consumption as a space where identity is negated, and on the other understand it as an act of realization, illustrates the paradoxical nature of consumption and its intrinsic complexity. Consumption practices are both an expression of individual design and anchors which allow us to construct relationships and connect ourselves with social contexts: consuming we construct our world, elaborating both implicitly and explicitly the meaning contained in goods and mediated by the market. The constitution of a society of consumption, which beginning with the economic boom has functioned as a vehicle for lifestyle production, capable of setting in motion processes of belonging and identification, has been abundantly supported by the spread of television, which from an educational medium changed into a device for socialization and the diffusion of mass consumption. The privileged medium of socialization in the 70s, the television is now joined

by a series of new media that contribute to weaken the family's role as transmitter of consumer practices.

The seven articles which make up the present *issue Consumer Culture, Identity and Processes of Socialization* all share the objective of investigating the dialectic of socialization practices and social conditioning originating in the culture of consumption. Through the use of different research methodologies and the study of different social practices or influences, all of the articles illustrate processes of education or socialization into the variegated world of consumption. The issue opens with my own article: an analysis of various studies conducted in the field of consumer sociology which underline the role of socialization with the intention of moving beyond a polarization of consumption as either a space for social annihilation or the maximum expression of the freedom of the subject.

Domenco Secondulfo's article analyzes the socialization of children into material culture. Secondulfo's innovative and thought provoking article enriches an area of research lacking in sociological scholarship, which for many years now considered objects and goods as insignificant in the study of cultural processes. Secondulfo stresses how approaching the dialectical relationship with the world of goods provides an essential lens for understanding the process of consumer socialization. The article underlines how, beyond being the place within which one enacts the rites of the so-called "religion of consumption," the place of sale is an important space for the socialization of the child into his future role as consumer. The strategies of negotiation and the promotion of the autonomy of the child-consumer merge in the point of sale, which becomes the backdrop for the spectacle of consumption.

The essay by Geraldina Roberti illustrates how practices of consumption are transmitted from mother to daughter. Her essay analyzes how the dictates, rules and models of behavior employed in the family - as Bourdieu had already demonstrated (1979) - are reproduced over the course of life, even when there is a change in the social context to which one belongs. The research, which was conducted through the use of 5 focus groups (involving 26 female students) and 15 semi-structured interviews, demonstrates how the consumption behaviors of daughters living outside the family context replicates the purchasing practices and behaviors learned from their mothers. The choice of purchasing places and strategies are nearly the same as those of their family.

From a study of consumption connected to the purchase and possession of goods and objects we move to Luca Mori's attentive analysis of the socialization of young people into drug use. The article is entirely successful in its objective of translating the meaning that the youth associate with the practice of using and consuming psychoactive-substances. From the qualitative research conducted in 3 observational sessions, 12 in-depth interviews and 2 group interviews, Mori's essay describes the existence of a youth culture that uses drugs as a performative object and an auxiliary experience to "being in society". The Author observes how drug consumption has been normalized with respect to the past and how the norms and modality of use are transmitted through peer groups. The study serves a valuable foundation for the fight against addiction because it allows us to understand the meanings implicit in the act of drug consumption.

In addition to the institutions of the family, school and peer groups, consumer socialization is historically transmitted through the mass media. In their essay, Claudio Riva and Ruggero Cefalo investigate the forms of social recognition constructed through the serial *Twilight*. The essay investigates the relationship formed between youth and forms of entertainment. Moving beyond a paradigm that sees them as passive consumers, the study shows how peer groups are the space in which youth express and co-construct the same, shared cultural codes. The relationship between media consumption and social recognition is investigated through an attentive qualitative study carried out in the form of 10 observational sessions at movie screenings and 20 in-depth interviews with young consumers.

Remaining on the argument of the influence exercised by the mass media on purchasing behaviors, Luisa Stagi's essay examines the narrative of "makeover" television programs - the so-called technology of the Self. The article attentively analyzes the social conditioning of lifestyle television, paying particular attention to programs associated with a disciplining of the body through diets. The study focuses on two television programs, aimed at adolescents and their families, in which the discursive repertoires of the pre-transformation, transformation and post-transformation are investigated. The popularity of such programs demonstrates the need to invest in the education and the formation of "competent consumers" capable of extricating themselves from the entanglement of a multitude of information sources.

Gian Paolo Lazzer's essay concludes the special issue. His essay investigates the monetary practices of Italian banks and immigrant citizens. Initially the article draws on Georg Simmel's fundamental essay on money and the figure of the foreigner, and a rich body of scholarship on themes of economic socialization and financial inclusion. Later, the essay pulls from a qualitative study based on the collection of 27 semi-structured interviews with bankers, and 20 interviews with members from the immigrant community, the Muslim community in Verona, and the Moldovan community in Padua, which provide an understanding of the principal characters of the socialization into money practices and the forms of resistance to change produced both by the banks and the immigrants.

I thank Domenico Secondulfo for providing the opening photo to the issue, which effectively represents one of the points of access to the multifaceted culture of consumption.

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