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¹ The title is intended as a tribute to the text of the same title by Juliet Schor (2004).

Born to buy. The socialization of young consumers

*Domenico Secondulfo**

Abstract: The aim of this essay is to analyse how children are socialized as consumers by retail areas. It draws on the tradition in media studies that focuses on advertising aimed at young consumers, supplementing it with the socialization strategies established in the same sales areas. The background to the study is provided by reflections about the evolution of these outlets and the convergence towards the recreational model, and considerations regarding the implosion of senses and functions both in the shopping experience and the places where it is carried out.

Keywords: children, marketing, family, consumption

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Introduction

This essay aims to inform the reader and the field of sociology of education about the influence that the organisation of points of sale has on the socialization of shopping in childhood, with particular reference to outlets mainly selling basic commodities, such as supermarkets, hypermarkets and shopping centres. It will focus on the fact that certain items have been devised to free children from family-based structures of authority – above all their parents – in order to encourage them to make impulse purchases and socialize them to have a recreational-expressive relationship with products and points of sale. The general context of this study is material culture, namely how objects and physical structures convey values and meanings and how their use can imprint these meanings on people (Secondulfo, 2012). This is part of the process through which the whole family are socialized to sales facilities along recreational lines; they are presented, experienced and internalised as places of fun, pleasure and the fulfilment of desires.

Background context

Throughout history and all over the world, societies have always tried to shape their members to fit an image of themselves. This socialization process has often been differentiated on the basis of gender, with men trained for (sometimes dangerous) activities outside the social group and women moulded for activities within the social group, usually linked to the field of caring. Toys and games have always been one of the areas of socialization par excellence, both in terms of the game types and the material culture surrounding them: swords, guns, rifles, hunting games and competitions for boys, and dolls, prams, kitchens and games based on caring, social skills and patience for girls (Gianini Belotti, 1982).

In the construction of the future members of each society and each social group, all of these socialization processes have always had the aim of moulding the emerging personality and identity like wax during the particularly malleable phase – also in physiological terms – of the intellectual, mental and cerebral development of the individual. This happens in accordance with the reference models produced, which are necessary for the society and social group in which the person will live his

or her adult life. The whole process is categorised as primary or secondary socialization, depending on the social institutions in which it occurs and the type of profiles that are shaped. Until quite recently, the family and kinship provided the main arena for primary socialization, and sometimes also for secondary socialization. Poor communication channels meant that young people remained in the relationship “bubble” formed by their families and relatives, who inevitably became the leading social actors in processes of identity formation. Even when the context of relationships became more open and varied, especially as a result of the industrial revolution and urbanisation, family of origin and kinship remained the main filters through which external realities and models were readapted and transmitted during the socialization phase.

It was only with the advent of mass society and electronic communications that new actors became part of the socialization processes in the home-centred social sphere of the family. This happened during the transition from an industrial society based on production to one based on consumption and sales. Families found it difficult to implement the same control and filtering processes against these actors, which had been simple and effective in the previous situation with its lack of communication structures. Since the 1970s, there has been a plethora of literature about this invasion of the field of family relations and the pluralisation of actors involved in primary as well as secondary socialization, which has mainly focused on the leading mass medium, television (Morcellini 1989, 1999; Puggelli 2002). This has led to a wide-ranging debate on the advantages, disadvantages and dangers created by the entry of other actors into a field essentially under the control of the family and in which primary socialization used to occur.

With the debate still raging, social processes continued to develop unhindered, granting television a permanent and influential place inside the restricted family circle, with an influence over children from a tender age; also considering the fact that the evolution of both the nuclear family and the job market gave television an even bigger role as an “electronic babysitter”. More recently, the spread of offline electronic devices has placed control of at least part of the relationship between children and television back into the hands of the family, such as through the choice of films, cartoons and games that can be used offline and on which the family can therefore exert a little more control than on the flow of communication from online television distribution. However, while the old form of

television became increasingly supervised by families, the development of telecommunications devices opened up a new front that parents found difficult to control, especially as they were often not sufficiently educated to use such technologies. This created uncharted waters for young minds that were impossible to patrol. In other words, the pluralisation of actors contributing to the primary socialization of the new generation is still expanding and is poorly controlled by the family, the institution that traditionally coordinated the process.

This competition has developed and has been studied mainly in communication structures, in accordance with a consolidated tradition in Italian sociology, whereby consumption-based studies evolve above all as a result of research on communications and advertising. Other distribution structures, which are equally characteristic of a consumer society and equally present in family life and the primary socialization of children, have not been analysed in enough detail. These include the physical structures for the distribution of goods – the supermarkets and hypermarkets that from the 1960s onwards rapidly colonised not only areas in cities and the countryside, but also the lifestyles and time cycles of families.

Within this general context, this essay aims to alert researchers to what is happening in these outlets and how they have more or less consciously organised themselves so that they can intervene in primary socialization processes in accordance with their goals and reference models. They have consequently crept into the structures of communications, relations and authority in the families that come into contact with them. The general mechanism is the dialectic of massification and individualisation first identified and analysed by the Frankfurt School ([Horkheimer & Adorno, 1974](#)), which then led to reflections on narcissism (Lasch, 1979), according to which mass distribution and control structures tend to exercise their relationship and power directly on individuals, bypassing and trying to break up the intermediate structures that might come between the source and individuals.

The strategies used by product distribution facilities provide an excellent example of the truth of this observation. From the circulation of advertising messages through means of mass communication – first and foremost television – to the techniques employed in product distribution facilities – supermarkets and hypermarkets – there is a constant strong drive to create specialised independent channels that link the source of the

messages to increasingly limited groups of individuals, making more contact with single members than the subgroup in general. In this way, the communication structure operates by separating its communications from any sharing and control by the social groups in which the individuals at whom it is aimed live. This is a progressive process well summarised in the concept of “lifestyle”, in its version of the expression of individuality through conformity, especially through behaviour related to the purchase and use of certain products.

Television has provided some striking examples in this respect: just look at the segmentation of the range of advertising in terms of time bands and channels. First of all, viewers have been fragmented into numerous subgroups on the basis of age, gender and time bands. They are targeted by extremely specialised advertising, which is devised especially for them and is generally unwelcome to viewers with different characteristics. There has also been an increase in the number of television sets, reaching a level of one for every person. Things have clearly changed since the use of television in the 1950s and 60s, when communications were aimed at incredibly large groups, often even bigger than the family that owned the television set, so media advertising had to be filtered according to the structures of relations, authority and values of the group as a whole. By contrast, a few decades ago television sets became present in different rooms in houses. As a result, individuals, who were assigned a category, could make use of individual advertising, freed from any mediation on the basis of structures of relations, authority and values that previously tied them to the larger group of which they formed part, in this case the family and kinship. There is a resounding difference.

Each member of the family, alone in front of a personal television set, or in the company of similar people in terms of the channel’s advertising categories, could make use of messages devised for them without any interference from collective structures such as the family, and without having to negotiate about products to use in terms of shared values and structures of authority. In this way, people are successfully socialized to the world of consumption and shopping outside the family, with products and points of sale structured and devised for the different consumer “targets”, or the different categories that the goods distribution system has placed each individual into. They therefore became able to develop their desires without having to consider the values, rules and authority in the family group that they lived in.

Young people, the perfect consumers

In this way, the combination of advertising structures and sales structures has “freed” one generation of consumers after another, distancing them, or at least trying to distance them from ties of values, authority and socialization in the family groups that they live in. This process has been especially meticulous in the age group from zero to thirty, with an almost obsessive focus on the age bracket from three-four to fifteen (Ironico 2010), to the point where a marketing branch specifically targeting children has developed. This is an age range in which traditionally the socializing pressure exerted by the family and kinship was always very strong, also because the lives of young people during these years are still totally within the nucleus of their family of origin. The process of segmentation and empowerment went ahead at an equal pace in media communications and the physical organization of product distribution facilities, with the creation of both increasingly focused advertising and new specialised points of sale and targeted routes in generalist outlets. All this was naturally accompanied by the creation of targeted products focusing on the autonomous and induced needs and desires of these different groups “labelled” by gender and age.

The young people in question ranged from adolescents – who goods distribution systems focused on from the 1950s onwards – to younger children, including the particular age bracket and processes of socialization defined as childhood. There has not been much literature about this phenomenon with a critical approach (Linn, 2005; Schor, 2001), which is also interesting for the sociology of education as, more than any other field, it needs to penetrate the communication and socialization processes that exist between children and the main figures in their family sphere. As far as adolescents are concerned, it is not difficult to infiltrate these ties in order to divide them in favour of retail structures, as this is a phase of identity construction in which conflicts within the family sphere are almost physiological. It is somewhat harder, however, to intervene in relations between children and important figures in their family sphere, as during this phase identity construction is still very much a part of family relations and the conflictual dynamics are not “physiological” like in the adolescent phase. For adolescents who experiment with different identities through the world of goods, the purchase of an item is often a kind of rite of passage,

above all within their peer groups, which see the choice, purchase and display of “tastes” as a form of absorption of their meanings and experimentation with new identities and individual personalities. Instead, at a younger age, identity is still closely linked to the processes of relations with key adults, so there is much less scope for seeking a “free” relationship with the world of products and the strength of this relationship is much weaker.

This reasoning is influenced by the analytical approach according to which these phases of the development of personal identity are strongly shaped, and perhaps almost invented, by society. For example, the social history of the family teaches us that the phase now termed adolescence was practically non-existent in other historical periods, and, in parallel, the phase now called childhood used to develop over a time span that was much more limited than now. This is also because in societies where production plays a central role, the new generation must be inserted into adult and production roles as soon as possible, which is not necessary in societies based on sales and consumption, since on one hand the role of the consumer is not necessarily linked to work – income from work is spent in a more controlled way than income from other sources – and on the other hand it is necessary to keep vast cohorts of young people socially passive, so that society can be managed top-down in an authoritarian way without any participation.

We will limit ourselves to indicating these considerations, as they form the background to the development of the reflections in this article. For further information on this type of approach, see the following authors (Aries 1974; Mitterauer 1991; Stone 1997).

The place of childhood in sales strategies

Traditionally, minors – especially children – were mainly seen by the sales system as a stimulus to purchase, as they are able to guide the shopping behaviours of the family either directly or indirectly. Many advertisements have operated along these lines; they are directed at children, but leave parents in the role of making the purchase. This is generated and guided by the child both directly, as a request, and indirectly,

as the parent's projection of the models of excellence channelled through the advertisements (pester power).

A new feature introduced by the evolution of retail areas², above all since the development of supermarkets (Secondulfo 2012), is the identification of children as future consumers and their almost direct purchasing power without the mediation of their parents. The two processes are naturally dialectically united. While children experiment with the opportunity to have direct access to goods, they acquire certain behaviours and, more importantly, gain experience of retail areas that will help shape their future behaviour as autonomous adult consumers. This evolution is also interwoven with the transformation of many areas – not only those for retail – in accordance with the theme park model along recreational lines, which now influences not only the tourism sector, but also, in general, almost all points of sale, in an increasingly cross-cutting way with regard to the different product groups. After all, the transformation of the shopping experience along recreational lines is one of the central paths of evolution in this phase of the cycle of goods. It is expanding greatly because it creates synergy between the greater familiarity with sales areas and the encouragement to make impulse purchases, which is the main aim of most media or outlet sales strategies. As a result, retail areas are frequently altered to fit the recreation ground model, above all large outlets from hypermarkets upwards.

The process of [familiarising](#) the consumer with retail areas also creates synergy with the socialization of the young consumer. Indeed, for many families, shopping on Saturday is one of the main, if not the only activity shared by the whole nuclear family. Therefore, it is fitting to embellish the event with recreational and expressive tones, transforming the experience into an excursion or a game that is also for adults, and turning the retail area into a [recreation ground](#). Outlets made an immediate response to this phenomenon and encouraged it by setting up play areas for children and families. Shopping centres were also transformed into amusement and service areas that can meet the organisational and recreational-relational

² In the transition from shop to supermarket, the figure of the shopkeeper as a mediator and guarantor disappears and consumers are alone in front of products. This stimulates both the consumer's self-determination (consumer associations) and impulse purchases (many sentences on shoplifting in supermarkets have recognised the extenuating circumstance of products being displayed directly and presented without any protection or intermediation).

needs of the family, with supplementary services to shopping such as laundries and areas for relaxing and socializing like bars and restaurants, as well as special play areas. This helps families to share the experience, which is necessary for household supplies, with minors.

Overall, there is a combined experience of recreational and relational pleasure, topped with the shopping experience and the stimulation and satisfaction of desires, presented as an all-round pleasurable experience which imbues the sales area with a special degree of familiarity and attractiveness. While this experience of recreational pleasure affects and attracts adults, it has an even greater effect on children. In this “widespread” socialization process, adult and child consumers accept a fun form of shopping that can replace a whole range of relational, social and economic activities – a precise and enjoyable way to spend free time. It features some strategies that are specially aimed at budding consumers, techniques which remove them from the family unit and make them autonomous as individual shoppers. Products play a fundamental role in these strategies.

In this case, the family often plays a contradictory role by participating in the recreational experience and thereby contributing to the liberation of desire and impulse purchasing, which is also encouraged by the general organisation of the point of sale, but at the same time having to curb the shopping drive of its members as part of the decision-making rules and structures shared by the collective family unit and controlled by those who have authority within it (usually the mother or parents). This contradiction is also found in modern retail areas, where there is always tension between the need to enchant and create a “wonderland” effect to encourage impulsive desires, and the need to control the behaviour of customers and the coercion of desire, which must in any case conclude with the payment of purchases (Ritzer 2000). We can summarise our reasoning in the following steps:

- in the background we can identify the process of the “recreationalisation” of consumer experiences, with the transformation of a whole series of service areas widely linked to consumption in accordance with the recreation ground model, in order to infantilise the consumer, transform shopping into a pleasurable experience in itself rather than for the function of the item or service purchased, and therefore “liberate” desire by encouraging impulse purchases, bypassing the consumer’s rationality;

- the evolution of the consumer society, with an increase in jobs for women and with both parents working, desynchronises, among other things, the time rhythms of family members, so that shopping trips are often one of the main moments in which the [family](#) share a common experience, boosted by the development of the retail areas mentioned in the previous point;
- the monetisation of free time, transformed into shopping time, through the process of the saturation of time productivity established by the consumer society, making both work time and non-work time productive; in this way, direct and indirect productivity alternate in harmony, guaranteeing the full economic use of a lifetime;
- therefore, from the perspective of childhood, the shopping experience takes on the appearance of a recreational and pleasurable event, a moment to share with parents and satisfy desires, enhanced by the concrete effect of purchasing items that are taken home for further satisfaction;
- up to this point, although the child's experience is a major element in the socialization process for this model of life and shopping, it is still part of the activities and experience of the family unit, and could be influenced by the rules and lifestyles of the latter; in other words, at this stage the child is not yet completely "free" as a consumer–shopper and at most can influence the purchases of parents who, in any case, maintain overall [control](#) of the experience.

At this point, the "second level" of socialization established by the point of sale comes into effect; it not only puts itself forward to be internalised as the ultimate place of desire and pleasure, the only place for having fun and playing, thereby socializing young consumers to shopping as an expressive game, but also offers children a dimension for expressing the same individual autonomy already given to adults, in a clear model of the transfer of expected behavioural patterns.

The point of sale implements several strategies to deal with this, in order to "liberate" young consumers from the control and value structure of the families in which they have their experiences, by way of goods and items devised for them and targeted exclusively at them. These strategies are constructed in such a way as to make it difficult for parents to interfere with their children's desires. They have not been fully perfected yet, at least in

the retail areas in which I have carried out some non-systematic observations as a consumer³; we can deduce that this is due to fear of a [negative](#) response by parents when the excessive pressure reveals the desire to interfere in the structures of communication and authority, and is therefore seen as a threat to parental authority and not, as is now the case, as an aid to the family, in as much as it makes children's involvement in the experience less problematic and even positive. This is important, as the experience is still an essential part of the life of the family unit.

My non-systematic observations of retail areas, above all supermarkets and hypermarkets, provided the following examples of this strategy:

- The consumer in miniature. In the model that has always been used for toys, childhood is channelled into games that reproduce a miniature version of the adult roles expected by society, such as equipment for [cooking](#), [prams](#) and baby bottles for girls in the 1950s and 60s, or cars and motorbikes for boys, supplemented in the age of [Barbie](#), by clothes and instruments for [shopping](#). In keeping with this model, some points of sale provide [small trolleys](#) for children, which are identical in shape to those for adults, thereby placing young consumers alone in front of products, just like their parents, [free](#) to transform their desires into the items on sale. In this way, children observe their parents and then take products from the shelves – obviously above all from those placed at their height – and put them into their trolleys, in an [imitation](#) of adult behaviour. Clearly, any act of control and veto by adults becomes difficult to put into practice at this point, because either the children need to be stopped from taking items on their own – but in that case what is the point of the trolley? – or the products in the little trolley need to be taken out and put back onto the shelves, which is perhaps an even more arduous task. This is a different relational structure from the one that sees children purely as a stimulus to purchase, where they ask for products, but their parents decide whether or not to take them from the shelves and put them into the trolley, mediating their requests without them being able to actively intervene.

³ My interest in this phenomenon stems from my daily experience as a consumer and from my natural curiosity about the world around me as a sociologist. After noting the behaviour of families in supermarkets, in particular those with children, and noting that the behaviour and products were identical in the different far-off places (Europe, Indonesia, the USA) that I visited for various reasons, I started to systematically observe these situations and reflect on their supporting mechanism of material culture, although I must say that I have not yet saturated the field of investigation.

This situation is not so common, probably because of the friction that it inevitably generates between children and their parents, as well as the objective danger inherent in the fact that the child physically moves outside their field of supervision. This has ultimately dissuaded outlet managers from adopting the solution, for fear of obtaining the [opposite](#) result to the desired outcome by distancing families from the point of sale.

- Let's play at the supermarket. This more common version does not interfere so much with family relations and involves the transformation of part of the shopping trolley into a vehicle for children. In this way, parents are guaranteed physical control and children have limited powers for shopping autonomously – even though they can take certain products placed at their level on their own, they have nowhere to put them and must therefore always submit to mediation by adults. In any case, the internalisation of the area and the experience of selling/buying in a recreational context is particularly strong, an essential premise for socializing children to retail areas not as specialised places exclusively associated with the function of purchasing goods, but as multifunctional play areas for general reference, similar to squares or parks, which can satisfy every desire and need, from items to social relations, through the purchase of goods. This internalisation process is an experience that is the right and necessary complement to the [implosion](#) of a whole series of individual and social actions in retail areas, of which outlets are currently the maximum point of expression (Viviani, 2008).

Figure 1. Let's play at the supermarket



Source: Secondulfo, D. (2014)

- Kinder eggs, or how to exploit queues. Finally, there is the frankly obvious and commonplace act of drawing benefit from unavoidable dead time, such as queuing at the checkout, so that children are attracted to sweets and toys. At the same time, this leads parents to think that a sweet can provide a welcome helping hand when restless or impatient children need to be pacified. The sweets are obviously often placed at the right level for children in order to bypass mediation by adults. Furthermore, the shopping experience thus concludes with a reward, turning the only moment in which there is a slight negative experience for adults – payment – into a pleasant one.

Figure 2. Queuing at the checkout



Source: Secondulfo, D. (2014)

Conclusions

To conclude these brief reflections, we can observe that the constantly increasing number of agents of socialization competing with the family – from TV onwards – have for some time also included points of sale, which previously only interfered to a minimal degree in the relationship between minors and their accompanying adults. This state of affairs is the result of synergy between a number of different elements: from changes in the job market, above all for women, to alterations in the work patterns of members of the family unit. For an idea of how important this point is, just consider the issue of policies of conciliation between working hours and

time for family and individual life, which is also a cause of political conflict. These changes are accompanied by the evolution of the points of sale themselves, which have become increasingly large and have gradually absorbed all the recreational and relational activities that used to be carried out in different places and times from those for shopping. The recreational evolution of outlets and the shopping experience means that family members see their shopping trips as fun experiences for socializing with rest of the family.

The combination of these two forms of evolution leads to the involvement of minors in the shopping behaviours of the family with an emphasis on fun and togetherness. Furthermore, through the relations that they see develop between their parents in these places and during these experiences, they are socialized to regard retail areas as places of recreation, expression and dissemination. This applies above all to the largest outlets, which can accommodate a variety of relational situations and different shopping experiences. All this intersects with the progressive and refined process of market segmentation operated by marketing, which is quick to isolate children as autonomous consumers by producing goods, advertising and settings specifically devised for them.

Strategies aimed at “liberating” children from the controls imposed by parents are now apparent in retail areas. In this way, they are built up and socialized as autonomous independent consumers.

Two main pillars support the construction of the future consumer by points of sale: recreational familiarisation with retail areas and the habit of making impulse purchases on the basis of individual desire. Outlets build these pillars with great care on a daily basis inside the identity and world vision of young consumers.

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