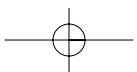
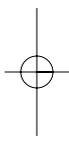
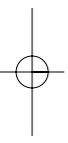
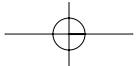
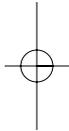
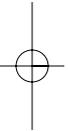




Part I

Children as Consumers





2

Developing as Consumers

Valérie-Inés de la Ville and Valérie Tartas

Chapter Aims

- To introduce three alternative perspectives used by marketing researchers and practitioners to explain how children develop as consumers.
- To discuss the cornerstone elements of these three models and the contrasting explanations they propose about the learning processes through which children develop as consumers.
- To delineate new research avenues in order to account for the creative capacities of children when they participate in joint consumption activities.

Introduction

Scientific articles aimed at linking the realms of childhood and economy appeared in the early 1950s and dealt mainly with the role children play when they take part in family consumption practices (Strauss, 1952). The concept of consumer socialization is a relatively recent research area having been defined for the first time in 1974 by S. Ward: 'The processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace' (Ward, 1974: 2). This broad definition implies an interdisciplinary approach, requiring social and cultural backgrounds, language skills, psychological development, emotional and symbolic dimensions, and so on (Robertson and Feldman, 1976). Thus, this chapter aims to clarify the contributions of three established alternative perspectives to understanding the development of children's abilities as consumers.

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- The first is a classic developmental-stage based perspective which focuses on the progressive acquisition of economic knowledge by children and aims at describing the transformation of children's consumption abilities.
- The second combines different process-centred models which focus on the role of social environment and aim at explaining how children are influenced by socialization agents in their acquisition of economic abilities.
- The third suggests that children are immersed in the realm of mass consumption culture and views children's consumption as a socio-historical activity that needs to be grasped in its entire complexity.

Furthermore, since consumer activities are situated within a broader context of social relationships, they serve as a means by which children learn about contemporary society and prevailing social rules (Oestergaard and Jantzen, 2000).

First perspective: cognitive development and the acquisition of economic knowledge

One branch of research draws on seminal work by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1937), applying it to the analysis of the development of economic thinking by children. This research perspective asks 'what' does the child know? It focuses on understanding what kind of economic knowledge children are able to use when they are confronted with practical problems linked to consumption activities. Using Piagetian terms, development can be defined as the process of adapting to the outside world. During this progression, individuals construct increasingly elaborate cognitive mechanisms to improve their control over their surrounding world. This developmental process unfolds in a natural way: children gradually build up skills by acting on their environment (the assimilation process), which will in turn impose its own structures on them (the accommodation process). Thus, three stages are proposed to describe and explain the cognitive development: the *sensori-motor stage*, where infants construct their knowledge through their actions on the surrounding world, which are at first quite limited; the preparation and entry into the *concrete logical operation stage* where children are able to decentrate and consider others' points of view; and the third one called the *formal thinking stage* where adolescents become able to reason on hypotheses and not only about concrete reality. The increasingly complex logical designs that characterize adult thought are regarded as the ultimate result of child developmental processes (see Young and Roland-Lévy, in this volume).

The American researcher Deborah Roedder-John (1999) has documented twenty five years of accumulated international research on children in relation to their role as consumers. She has incorporated the findings into a general conceptual framework that conceives of consumer socialization as progressing through a series of three sequential stages capturing major

cognitive shifts from preschool to adolescence: the *perceptual stage* (3 to 7 years), the *analytical stage* (7 to 11 years), and the *learned stage* (11 to 16 years) (see Table 2.1). These stages, essentially defined in terms of age groups, include various dimensions that characterize children's knowledge. Motivations as well as cognitive and social skills are aspects of these stages, which are also related to children's growing sophistication with regard to products, brands, advertising campaigns, shopping, pricing, decision-making strategies, and influential strategies.

Using Piaget's theory, Roedder-John's framework seeks to identify the main shifts in children's understanding of basic economic concepts. It depicts young children's skills as being limited and only based on perceptual skills, which are not enough to understand the implicit messages contained in advertising for example. Thus from 3 to 7 years old, children show an egocentric orientation, as they are not able to differentiate points of view. Therefore, they might not be able to distinguish the persuasive motivations of the advertiser from the information needed by the consumer. Moreover,

Table 2.1 Stages in children's development as consumers

| <i>Characteristics</i> | <i>Perceptual stage</i> 3–7 years | <i>Analytical stage</i> 7–11 years | <i>Reflective stage</i> 11–16 years |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Knowledge structures</i> | | | |
| Orientation | Concrete | Abstract | Abstract |
| Focus | Perceptual features | Functional/underlying features | Functional/underlying features |
| Complexity | Unidimensional | Two or more dimensions | Multidimensional |
| | Simple | Contingent (if-then) | Contingent (if-then) |
| Perspective | Egocentric (own perspective) | Dual perspectives (own+others) | Dual perspectives in social context |
| <i>Decision-making and influence strategies</i> | | | |
| Orientation | Expedient | Thoughtful | Strategic |
| Focus | Perceptual features | Functional/underlying features | Functional/underlying features |
| | Salient features | Relevant features | Relevant features |
| Complexity | Single attribute | Two or more attributes | Multiple attributes |
| | Limited repertoire of strategies | Expanded repertoire of strategies | Complete repertoire of strategies |
| Adaptive | Emerging | Moderate | Fully developed |
| Perspective | Egocentric | Dual perspectives | Dual perspectives in social context |

Source: Roedder-John (2002: 32)

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children's ability to deal with information is limited and prevents them from making decisions based on a plurality of dimensions as adults do. This model provides descriptive information outlining how a child's intellect develops within the analytical stage – starting from fragmentary and imprecise ideas and proceeding towards a more logical understanding. In the analytical stage, children are becoming aware of the complexity of the market because their way of reasoning becomes more abstract and is no longer only driven by their own perceptions. The reflective stage allows pre-adolescents and adolescents to develop critical thinking about the marketplace and how it functions.

Drawing on this cognitive stage-based framework of child development, Roedder-John presents five areas of research, which she considers to be the effects of the process of consumer socialization. They imply an acquisition of various knowledge, skills and values, for instance advertising and persuasion knowledge, transaction knowledge, and decision-making skills and abilities, negotiation skills, values and motives of consumption.

As a managerial transposition of the cognitive developmental theory of Piaget, this framework of consumer socialization was mainly addressed to marketing managers with a two-fold aim: firstly, to describe the development of consumer socialization through three cognitive stages, and secondly, to offer a 'toolkit' to help marketing practitioners improve their targeting of children and adolescents. Roedder-John acknowledged that she focused on research from a managerial and marketing perspective, and that her concentration on consumer research published in marketing and communication journals led her to exclude other research areas dealing with child development. This might explain why her theoretical framework overlooked three important points:

- *Cognitive development is driven by biological or internal factors* To go beyond the mere physical objects that were the main focus in Piagetian studies, Roedder-John used Selman's (1980) theory, which integrates the social dimensions of child development and documents the changes in children's way of thinking about the social world. Although it takes into account children's capacity to consider another's point of view and to behave in accordance with a conventional system of social roles, this perspective provides a very limited understanding of child consumer socialization since it conceives of socialization itself as a fundamentally solitary cognitive construction. From a Piagetian perspective, the socialization process of the child is seen only from the point of view of the endogenous factors that lead the child to pass from self-centredness to other-centeredness. In such a perspective, only internal processes may explain the development of economic thinking and the transitions between the different stages.
- *The use of age as a marker of cognitive skills* By placing 'age' – instead of the internal structure of thought – as the cornerstone of her framework, Roedder-John diverted Piagetian theory from its own foundations. She conceived of development as only a difference of degree in the understanding and use of economic knowledge, and not as a qualitative difference in the nature of reasoning involved in economic activities and market situations, whereas in Piagetian terms the idea

of stages is much more complex and relates to the internal cognitive mechanisms of assimilation, accommodation and equilibration. Jean Piaget himself stressed that what should be retained from his model was the succession of stages and not the age ranges because these could vary greatly according to cultural and social contexts (Bringuier, 1977: 57). However, some researchers do criticize stage-oriented theories of child development as, in the context of a globalizing marketplace fostering the internationalization of mass media and consumer culture, the everyday life of contemporary children is extremely different from that of former times (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

- *The exclusive focus on logical reasoning* By considering children as 'economic problem solvers' trying to succeed in an adult economic world (Duveen, 1994), managerial approaches promote a specific kind of knowledge and reasoning (logical) while overlooking a major mode of human thought, the narrative one. Most of the studies in economy psychology and economics were conducted to find out if children would behave as logical and rational actors in economic decision making. However children's economic activities appear not to be based on a purely rational basis. As Bruner (1986) pointed out, two major modes of thinking characterize human cognition: the 'syntagmatic' or 'narrative' mode and the 'paradigmatic' or 'logical' mode. Narrative mode of thought (see Vignette 1) does not compensate for under-developed logical abilities, as these are two different modes of thinking. In the first, events are connected to one another through a narrative frame allowing the creation of stories, whereas in a paradigmatic mode reasoning faculties pursue logical truth. If the child develops his or her narrative capacity very early on in everyday activities, the paradigmatic thought (or logico-scientific) only emerges after systematic education, for which the institutional dimension, such as the schooling system, has received little consideration within the Piagetian theory.

Vignette 1: the narrative mode of perceiving and thinking

Cultural psychology, as proposed by Bruner, deals with how individuals make sense of the world and how they engage with established systems of shared meaning, with the beliefs, values, and symbols of the culture at large. It concentrates on how individuals construct 'realities' based on common cultural narratives and symbols, and how reality is 'intersubjective' through social interaction rather than 'external' or 'objective'. The 'narrative, constructivist or interpretive' mode of perceiving and knowing about the world is more suited to our perception of people and experience, while the 'paradigmatic or logico-scientific' mode is appropriate to the natural and physical sciences. Narrative cognition is concerned with the meaning of experience.

'From infancy, most of children are immersed in the texts of popular culture. The texts and artefacts of popular culture frame children's understanding of the world and of them ... visual representation such cinematic texts, stylised illustrations, cartoons, videos or photographs are part of the landscape of meaning that social subject encounter in everyday life'. (Luke, 1994: 289)

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In short, we can conclude that the theory of cognitive development has played a dominant role in management academic circles as well as in marketing practice (Siegel and al., 2002). Nevertheless, critics have pointed out that socialization should be defined as a function of environmental influences rather than as a purely individual cognitive process, which constitutes a transition to the second perspective.

Second perspective: acquiring social skills and knowledge through interaction with socialization agents

A second course of study endeavours to overcome certain limitations of the cognitive-driven approaches by incorporating the social aspects of economic development, using various social variables, and applying the social education model elaborated by Bandura (1977). This process-oriented approach to consumer socialization has gained ground in understanding 'how' the child acquires his or her economic knowledge.

Moschis and his colleagues (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Moschis and Moore, 1979) developed an alternative theory of child consumer socialization, which offered a more accurate definition of consumer socialization that refers to three theoretical elements: the structural antecedents, the socialization process in itself, and the behavioural outcomes. This initial definition has been enriched by successive complementary contributions that interweave three theoretical frameworks which all focus on the processes at stake in the development of economic understanding and consumer behaviours (see Figure 2.1).

The first can be found in the Piagetian theory as revisited by Berti and Bombi (1988), which suggested that children are active role-takers in the economic domain. Drawing on these studies, the authors defined economic socialization as an on-going process by which the child assimilates knowledge and reasoning about the economic world and consumption practices. The emphasis was put on children's methods of interpreting the marketplace as well as on the specificity of the cognitive operations needed to understand economic notions.

The second draws on the social role model theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests that a child is supposed to learn how to play different roles in society such as pupil, sibling, grandson, as well as consumer. The economic education is achieved in practice owing to four main sources of information: parents and family habits, peers, advertising, and the products themselves. The inclusion of social roles emphasized the importance of the social environment on children's cognitive elaborations. It considered the influences of parents and peers as well as the effect of gender as the main factors that help

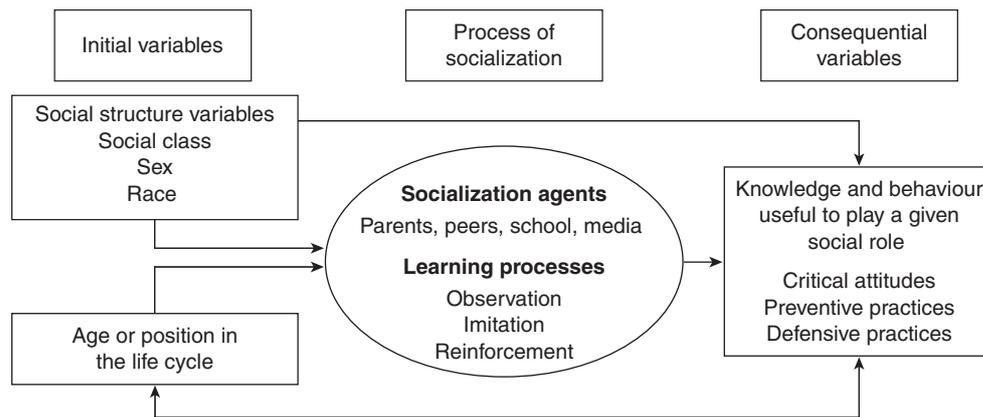


Figure 2.1 Consumer socialization process

Source: Adapted from Moschis and Churchill (1978) and complemented by several authors

children become active economic agents – able to choose a product, learn how to buy it, and understand how the marketplace is governed.

The third uses Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning which suggests that two central processes – observation and imitation (mimicry of other consumers e.g. parents, peers, brothers and sisters, etc.) – can explain both real consumer behaviour (such as comparing prices and products) and more complex and abstract notions (such as purchasing power and taxes). The role of social environment is explained through two main independent variables: the nature of the social environment in which the child is involved, and the type of reinforcement or feedback provided by the environment.

The combination of these three theoretical contributions that were considered interrelated led, for instance, to Lassare and Roland-Lévy (1989) linking four variables that derived from general socialization theories: 1) the socialization agents (peers, family, school, mass media); 2) the learning process (in particular imitation or vicarious learning); 3) the social structure variables (age, sex, social class); and 4) the learning content. Their work allowed a broader understanding of consumer socialization processes and represented a clear invitation to explore how the socialization process actually works in everyday and casual social activities as well as in more formal social contexts.

The main contributions of the theoretical frameworks elaborated within this perspective include linking cognition to social interactions and avoiding the limitations of a strictly individualistic cognitive development approach. Authors such as Berti and Bombi (1988), Lassare and Roland-Lévy (1989) or Lachance and Legault (2007) focused on the way children or young people are integrated into society through the appropriation of the roles played by various models. Thus, this body of research shows that the main socialization

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agents involved in children's consumer socialization are threefold: traditional (family circles, peers and school), professional (marketing managers, communication agencies), and finally virtual (web communities, social networking websites).

These process-oriented frameworks about child consumer socialization perceive social environment through two key variables: the child's social environment and the feedback and reinforcement provoked by this environment. Thus, this process approach tries to consider the individual and the cognitive operations involved in economic situations as well as the social contexts in which each child develops. However, in spite of their ambitious attempt, these frameworks leave three important issues unanswered.

- *A limited scope of exploration that ignores young children* This theoretical perspective allowed a recombination of several research results obtained through different methodologies: surveys through semi-structured interviews, face-to-face interviews in focus groups, observations and questionnaires. Nevertheless, the first shortcoming comes from the empirical studies that are mainly focused on pre-adolescents, adolescents, young adults and adults (Lachance and Legault, 2007), neglecting young children such as preschool and early school children. As a result, this process perspective only covers a limited explanatory scope since it favours pre-adolescents and adolescents.
- *Vicarious learning cannot account for children's creative capacities* The 'modelling exposure' perspective argues that being confronted by parental economic behaviour is sufficient to trigger the development of a child's economic skills. But then a crucial question remains unanswered: how can we explain the emergence of new behaviours in children, adolescents, or adults (see Vignette 2)? It is then necessary to go beyond this second process-oriented approach to explain creative behaviours, i.e. behaviours that were not previously available in the social environment and that could not have been modelled or imitated? Focusing exclusively on observation and imitation impedes the development of an explanation for creative behaviours originating independently from those already developed within family circles or peer groups. In psychology, the modelling approach has been criticized: imitation of adults or more experienced children is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to explain children's cognitive progressions (Doise and Mugny, 1981).

Vignette 2: some examples of creative behaviours

Children are immersed in new digital tools and networks which were not available to their parents. This leads them to invent collective forms of appropriation, peer-to-peer creativity and differing modes of self-expression:

- Instant text-messaging such as MSN and chatrooms or SMS on mobile phones that nurture the development and institutionalization of a new abbreviated language and its subsequent language games.

- Deviant uses of MMS image-messaging on mobiles phones such as 'Happy Slapping' videos.*
- Peer to peer exchanges that foster the emergence of new business models in cultural industries.
- Creation of personal websites and blogs.
- Continuously staging one's activities and friendships online through social networking sites such as Facebook.

*Children send videos via mobile phones showing a child being beaten or slapped by others

- *Interaction does not constitute the key unit of analysis* Even though social interactions are not the central focus of their empirical analysis, the process models highlight the role of interaction with others – individuals enacting their institutional roles – as a central explanatory factor. In fact, the individual and social issues are seen as two separate entities, which certainly need to be re-entangled. However, in the end the individual remains the cornerstone of the analysis and the theoretical elaboration. Social influence approaches maintain a focus on the individual as the basic unit of analysis and examine the influence of 'outside' social forces. In the social influence perspective, since individual competence is traditionally seen as separate from environmental circumstances, individuals are considered to possess knowledge prior to being involved in a social interaction, and then to have a social experience allowing a consideration of other possible courses of action, finally absorbing them so they become a part of their personal repertoire.

Yet as Cram and Ng (1999) note, 'both psychological and marketing approaches (social learning theory) have inherent faults in terms of their ability to provide a full picture of children's consumer socialization. These faults include a lack of understanding of children as active agents within a cultural context which, in turn, has resulted in a dearth of cross-cultural research and the widespread acceptance of the white, middle-class nuclear family as the "normal" context within which children are socialised'. Out of this critique these authors go on to develop their own approach, called 'scaffolding', which is based on Bruner and Haste's (1987: 1) definition of socialization as a process through which children acquire a 'framework for interpreting experience and learning how to negotiate meaning in a manner congruent with the requirements of culture'. Their 'scaffolding' approach ties three consumption-related concepts – 'ownership', 'money' (as a medium of exchange), and 'price' – which provide children with a framework for integrating an increasing variety of consumption experiences. Cram and Ng discuss how these concepts validate and support children's consumer socialization, leading to a wider perspective of consumer socialization. In this sense, they opened up avenues for socio-cultural approaches to children's consumption which lead us to the third perspective.

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Third perspective: transforming children's participation in joint consumption activities

This more recent approach draws on cultural psychological theory, considering that children are immersed in the realm of mass consumption culture. In contrast with the two previous ones, this perspective goes beyond considering children as mere individuals and contends that development results from the progressive involvement of children in several *social activities* available in their environment. From a theoretical standpoint, the emphasis is on examining how children actually participate in socio-cultural activities and especially how they take part in consumption activities. To understand how children learn and develop through a participation in socio-cultural activities, it is necessary to accept that cultural significance is more than the mere addition of changes in individual thinking that result from social interaction and discussions with other participants (Rogoff, 1998: 686). A key contribution of this perspective is to underline that institutional backgrounds (family, school, religion, etc.) and their derived power structures shape both language and cultural meanings in a given society.

Within this framework, the child is clearly integrated into a social body with which he or she interacts and from which he or she receives help and reassurance when daring to participate in everyday social life. Consequently, the relevant unit of analysis is certainly not the isolated child confronted with a problem, but rather the joint activity developed within an interaction: between a child and an adult, a child and a more experienced child, or within a small group. By confronting a practical problem such as a purchase decision, or defining a socially acceptable use of an object with a more experienced partner, a child can discover the cultural significance of objects. In this perspective, the transformation of children's consumer roles is the lens through which developmental transitions are understood.

The developmental approach proposed by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky is the cornerstone of this third perspective as it considers development in relation to the cultural environment in which the child develops. Culture in itself is not seen as a merely external variable but as a constitutive element of child development. To go further, Vygotsky (1934/1985) used the concept of 'psychological' or 'semiotic' tools to account for the relationship between the individual and the external world (Wertsch, 1985). Child consumer activities constitute a social activity mediated by various cultural tools such as the language, the social standards called upon, the rhetoric evoked, and the purchased objects or products themselves. Through everyday activities, the child gradually assimilates a conventional language particular to consumption – such as concepts of brand, price, quality, comparisons of products – and a set of social standards relating to consumption in a given cultural context – such as mastered references, a search for identity, membership within a group, and feeling of belonging to a social

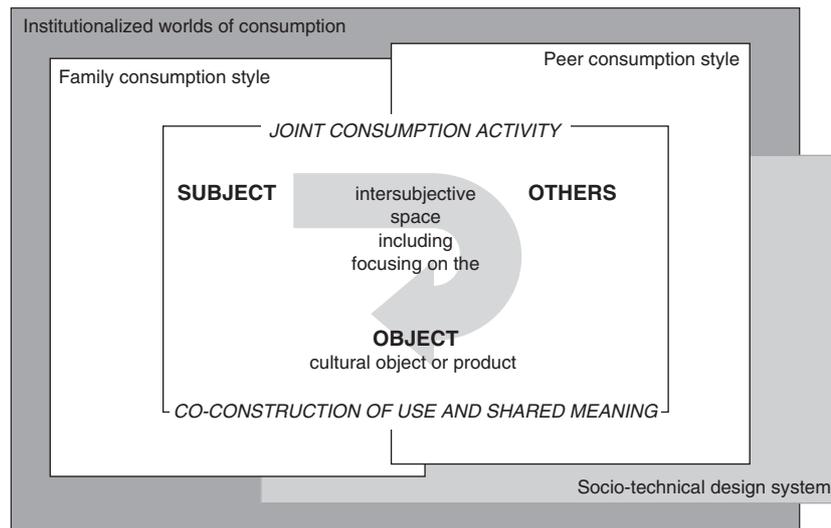


Figure 2.2 Consumption activities as mediating and mediated cultural experiences

Source: de la Ville, 2005

class (Gronow and Warde, 2001). Thus, studying the psychological tools or the systems of signs used by children during their development as economic actors enables a precise analysis of how they understand and practise consumption. To obtain what they want, children must tell an appropriate story and know how to present their actions and objectives in order to make them legitimate within specific social groups – family circles or peer groups. As the narrative capacities of the child increase in the process of economic socialization, researchers can analyse the evolution of children’s accounts of their consumption practices. By 3 to 4 years of age, children can be regarded as ‘experts’ in the use of various narrative forms, knowing how to handle different rhetorical registers in order to evoke empathy in their close relations, which explains how children can influence family purchases.

This leads us to suggest that children develop as economic actors within a complex cultural system that combines several inter-dependent dimensions (see Figure 2.2). In the *joint consumption activity*, three elements are interwoven:

- The child is never alone but is always guided by others (adult caregivers and more experienced children) in questioning the practices of consumption and in constructing socially shared meanings.
- The term ‘cultural object’ covers any socially and historically created product (not only the material and physical characteristics of the object but also its symbolic and semiotic dimension).

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- The cultural object on which attention is focused is a socially and historically created product that includes in its design a technical, social and commercial background. This institutional background strongly directs its potential uses.

The significance of children's consumption practices is framed by the normative requirements of both family and peer consumption styles. The child has to learn to deal with the conflicting requirements held by the different social groups to which he or she belongs (Page and Ridgway, 2001). Moreover, beyond these face-to-face relationships, children's consumption practices are also enabled and constrained by wider institutional systems including:

- The institutionalized worlds of consumption (i.e. distribution and retailing, regulatory requirements, socially permitted sales techniques, sales on the internet, cultural events like Christmas, Easter, carnival festivities, etc.).
- The on-going innovations of the socio-technical design system that bring new opportunities in designing products for children. For example 'smart toys' or interactive cuddly toys mix electronics and traditional techniques and reflect the development of the toy industry, especially in relation to technological innovation.

Among the various mediating cultural tools that are used within this system, some are developed by managers and play a major role, such as:

- *Packaging* This structures and channels children's learning experiences by constraining the categorisation process used to recognize, classify and compare products (Cochoy, 2002).
- *Brand characters* This creates an effective relationship between the brand and the child and establishes brand recognition by young consumers (Lawrence, 2003).
- *Advertising* As a persuasive technique inherent to mass media, (Kline, 1993, Klein et al., 2003) it contributes to the diffusion of values, social norms, symbolic languages and behaviours linked to consumption practices.

As a consequence, children's consumption practices cannot be reduced to a mere purchase decision: educational, social and institutional dimensions are at the core of the long process allowing children to take part in the consumer world. Moreover, when using an item, a child discovers and learns important information about social life and its normative requirements. Thus, child consumption practices are both a mediated and a mediating social activity through which a child learns many things far beyond consumption itself (de la Ville, 2005). For instance, when choosing a gift to take to a birthday party, the child learns that different social rules come into play depending on whether the beneficiary is a boy, a girl, or an adult and so on (Cook, 2002). If child consumption can be considered a mediated activity – through different forms of semiotic tools (such as language, advertising, packaging, etc.) and through different kinds of guidance (adult or peer one) – it is also important to understand it as a mediating social activity. Indeed, by participating in joint consumption activities, children not only acquire knowledge and competences linked with consumption (for example

about brands or products), they can also learn to develop their social abilities such as their persuasion skills, their vocabulary, their way of interacting with others, and their ability to divert authority requirements and play with formal and informal status.

Considering this complex system, the central focus of enquiry becomes: how do children participate in socio-cultural consumption activities and how does their position change from being *peripheral participants* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) – as the users of a product bought by their parents or the observers of buying situations – to being *central participants*, namely as decision makers? Indeed, learning to consume is not simply a matter of socialization: it supposes that the child is able to adjust his level of participation in the activity depending on varied socio-cultural rules (Rogoff and al., 2006). Accordingly, research should focus on deciphering the variety of consumption activities in which children are involved and on understanding the social and cultural conditions that make them adjust their participation by different degrees:

- **First degree: a *peripheral participation*** Meaning that young children are mainly in a position of observers, when discovering the items brought home by their parents or older siblings, when accompanying their parents to shop in traditional markets and retail outlets, or even when observing shopping on-line at home.
- **Second degree: a *more focused and active participation*** Meaning children now prescribe consumer items, which are legitimized by caregivers, peers or siblings.
- **Third degree: a *central participation*** Meaning children now act as active and competent consumers, able to legitimately decide how to spend their own pocket money in some consumption areas that are culturally defined as specific spaces for children within a cultural community.

This cultural perspective shows that children are able to create their own social rules and modify words and objects belonging to adulthood. In so doing, they generate their own socially shared meanings and cultures. The heroes and celebrities they admire, the new forms of narratives they explore, the games and playing activities in which they are involved, the possibilities offered by the technologies they use and so on, are constituent elements of children's culture that differ from their parents' (Buckingham, 2000; Cook, 2008). Birthday celebrations are a very emblematic form of children's socialization where the correct social rules to be followed are not only defined by parents but also by children themselves (Sirota, 1999).

Conclusion

We have contrasted and clarified the potential contributions of three perspectives of consumer socialization to the understanding of how children gradually enter the realm of consumption practice and learn to take part in varied consumption activities. In the first perspective, by considering

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socialization to be a fundamentally solitary cognitive construction by an individual developing through a succession of stages, academic researchers in management and marketing tend to perpetuate a quite restricted understanding of children's consumer socialization. They favour the logical-mathematical dimension of thought and overlook the narrative, socio-cultural, institutional and historical dimensions that also constitute consumption. But even if the second perspective attempts to integrate the social environment as a constitutive part of the process of economic socialization, it often reduces it to a matter of influence on the choices made by an individual child. That is why it appears necessary to develop a broader approach that takes into account two important points:

- Contemporary children develop within different cultural backgrounds (a dominant mass consumption culture in western societies versus other cultural systems in developing countries for instance).
- Political, religious and social institutions provide different mediating tools and relationships that shape children's cultural activities – including consumption activities.

Nevertheless, gaps still exist in our understanding of the various interrelated factors shaping the process of consumer socialization: 'Cultural changes, such as the growth of single-parent families, and technological change, such as the internet, suggest the need to revisit existing findings about socialization and address new concerns' (Roedder-John, 2002: 79).

Future research directions

For a more comprehensive understanding of how children develop their consumption activities, marketing research should focus on the language children practise in their everyday life. The consumption activities in which children are involved constitute a 'permanent re-creation', an on-going invention through which children renew cultural assets. Children adapt products, toys, and the like to particular circumstances, re-combining them according to the perceived objective, and inventing meanings that remain temporary (depending on technological and media advances, in particular through websites dedicated to information and commerce). Thus, from a methodological standpoint, this inventive dimension of child consumption practices should encourage us not to consider children as mere respondents, but as co-researchers who actively participate in the interpretation of their own experiences as apprentice consumers (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2003 ; Greene and Hogan, 2005).

A second line of investigation could tackle the issue of risks linked to consumption and determine to what extent a child's desires shape his or her daily activities. As a consequence, another key research perspective could be

aimed at understanding the modes of informal education – within retail stores, at home, among siblings or in peer groups – that contribute to shaping children’s knowledge about consumption practices in relation to specific cultural contexts. It should lead us to reflect on the status of children in the consumer society and the methods available for education aimed at increasing the degree of vigilance and reflexivity of young consumers. Furthermore, this line of study could specify the consumption situations in which children may be considered as vulnerable consumers in need of protection. Conversely, a complementary research perspective could question the social construction of specific areas where children are conceived as actually empowered consumers, as even more competent or expert than adults in the marketplace.

A third line of improvement includes an analysis of the historical, institutional and cultural aspects of the joint-problem solving activities that are observed in consumption practices. Socio-cultural approaches pay special attention to how both participants and institutions determine the goals, means, situation, and definition of consumption activities. A reflection on the evolution of the institutional elements that enable and justify the child’s position right at the heart of commercial situations is essential. Children’s economic socialization takes place within a broader historical trend in western cultures that has been apparent since the beginning of the twentieth century in the USA. The ‘empowerment’ of children as consumers in their own right provides contemporary young consumers with the institutional, cultural, and ideological resources to legitimate their active participation in the marketplace (Cross, 2002; Cook, 2004).

Note

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Discussion questions

- 1 Trace three contrasting definitions of the consumer socialization of children.
- 2 Do the three perspectives on consumer socialization differ when relating to children or adults?
- 3 How do the three approaches to consumer socialization define children’s agency?
- 4 What arguments can these three perspectives on consumer socialization offer to determine whether a child is ‘competent’ or ‘vulnerable’ in everyday consumption activities?

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