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## **Becoming Consumers: Socialization into the World of Goods**

*Francesca Setiffi\**

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*Abstract:* The following article examines consumer socialization from a sociological perspective. Recent sociological scholarship on both childhood and consumption has dedicated little attention to investigating the process by which norms and values are internalized through consumer culture. However, the growth of the international market for children's products and the intensification of marketing and advertising campaigns which targeting both male and female children - like the daily practices transmitted through the family and school that teach children consumption habits - require us to reflect on consumption's pervasive influence on the identity construction of children, on their way to becoming consumer-subjects. Today, advertising addresses above all the individual subject. This is true with regard to the worlds of both adults and children. In the process of consumer socialization, the related practices, norms and behavioral models become interwoven with the culture of a society transmitted through the implicit and explicit messages of advertising. The identity of the individual is formed through a process of socialization in which cultural representations are transmitted. This includes cultural representations from consumer culture that are then reinterpreted by one's family, school, peer group, and the mass media. Although a subject never stops learning and adapting in their lifetime, the following article focuses above all on childhood: a crucial phase in the cognitive and moral development of the individual in which the family and the school play a critical role in the transmission of values from one generation to the next.

*Keywords:* consumer culture, consumer socialization, childhood, identity

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## **Introduction**

Consumption provides us with a particular view onto social reality. Observing and analyzing it provides us with a picture of cultural transformations and changes in the social stratification. Consumption itself represents a request for identity recognition; of an identity shaped from the beginning and throughout its development by the cultural system, an identity that - as Weber's definition of class affirms - represents the expression of the lifestyle of a certain social group.

One's standard of life, his or her consumption habits, purchasing choices and strategies represent a series of economic and cultural boundaries that delineate the lines of social stratification and indicate different needs of self and mutual recognition. But consumption is also a way of expressing one's identity, an identity which has been assimilated, internalized, and at times negotiated, throughout one's life, during childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

The cultural models produced by consumer society and transmitted and negotiated by traditional institutions of socialization like the family and school, as well as indirect forces like the mass media and peer groups, are numerous. Within this context, educational processes are more focused on developing a subject's ability to elaborate and reflect on consumption choices, attitudes and behaviors while for the most part socialization processes are centered around the acquisition of a set of social competencies, norms and values consistent with models of contemporary consumption and functional to the subject's assimilation in society.

As phases of the cognitive and moral development of an individual infancy and adolescence provide us with a particularly incisive picture of the forms of social reproduction transmitted by the family, school, peer groups and the mass media. The socialization into a certain lifestyle is anchored in the routine practices observed in the family, learned at school, imitated from friends, absorbed, both critically and uncritically, from mass media. In light of the increasing number of institutions involved in the socialization of subjects into the world of goods, and the dominant role played by the mass media, the family seems to have lost some ground as the dominant transmitter of consumption practices, values and norms: "Family continues to play a significant role but in the present society consumption models develop mainly in the social area by means of

influence exerted by interpersonal relations, and by the corporate and media world” (Leonini & Santoro, 2010, p. 191).

### **An Influencer and Target of the Market: Subject-consumer Autonomy**

The detachment of the subject, adult or child, is the result of a long process of increasing autonomy with regard to consumption choices. This trend translated into an advertising push on the part of institutions to substitute the family - once the primary target of consumer pressure - with the individual. The discomfort felt by the ‘man alone in the world of goods’ (Secundulfo, 2012a) exemplifies the isolation of the subject and his bewilderment within a depersonalized society of mass consumption. The increasing autonomy of the subject from the family, in terms of his purchasing choices and preferences, results in advertising and sales strategies aimed at children, no longer just subjects capable of influencing the choices of parents, but themselves targets of marketing and advertising campaigns.

For Lipovetsky (2006) the shift to an individualized consumer can be traced to three major moments in the history of consumption capitalism: the first cycle of mass consumption (Lipovetsky 2006, p. 7) which stretches from the 1880s up until the beginning of WWI and represents the birth of mass markets; the period beginning around 1950, which sees the birth and development of the ‘society of abundance’ which is characterized by “exceptional economic growth, a greater level of productivity at work and the spread of the principles of Fordism” (Lipovetsky 2006, p. 12); and a new cycle that emerges at the end of the 70s, enacted by consumer economies which presenting themselves as “a compromise between the mythologies of social standing and fun, between ‘traditional’ consumption with the aim of demonstrating and a hedonistic individualistic form of consumption” (Lipovetsky 2006, p. 19). In the last phase, which sees the birth of the hyperconsumption society, the subjective functions of consumption change: “in contrast to ‘traditional’ consumption - which clearly expressed the economic and social identity of the subject - (today) consumer behaviors reflect the identity of an individual in terms of age differences, personal tastes, cultural and subjective identity, even through the purchase of products bearing no particular distinguishing characteristics” (Lipovetsky, 2006, p. 22). A society of hyperconsumption

is formed, founded on the necessity of subjects to communicate their individuality through goods. In this society of hyperconsumption: anxiety underlies the new taste which adolescents have for brands. Although it is true that brands allow for the classification and differentiation of groups, the motivation for choosing them is also connected with a culture of democracy. “For a ‘young person’, flaunting a logo does not represent an attempt to place themselves above others, but rather, an attempt to avoid appearing ‘less’ than the others” [...] (Lipovetsky, 2006, p. 22). An established brand allows children, adolescents and adults to emerge from anonymity and demonstrate their full participation in the fashion game.

Brands continue to act as mediators of social belonging, although with a different type of influence than that of demarcating social status, highlighting their role as a reducer of social complexity. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Setiffi, 2013), lifestyle television (reality shows) has the same function of containment, producing a set of norms of socialization free from social traditions. The market exerts its role alongside traditional institutions of socialization through television programs that circulate a set of rules and behaviors defined in terms of the binomials ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste, ‘refined’ and ‘popular’, etc.. These television shows attempt to replace a hierarchical order previously acquired through the lifestyle of the family and or the community. The cooking show is a sub-genre of lifestyle television which has exploded in recent years. The programs presents themselves to the public following a different communicative approach than that used by well-known programs of the same genre, placing stress on the dynamics of power tied to gender and the personal success of the participants (Viviani, 2013).

With regard to the world of children, many studies have begun dating the advent of the child consumer in Western society to the first decades of the twentieth century (Jacobson, 2004; Cook, 2004; Cross, 2004; Schrum, 2004; Buckingham, 2007, 2011), way before the post-World War II period, commonly considered to be that of the nascent society of mass consumption. As Jacobson notes: “despite such enthusiasm for developing child markets, historians have generally ignored or dismissed the importance of early-twentieth-century children’s advertising. Identifying the 1950s as the pivotal historical moment, scholars instead have argued that greater influence, less rigid childrearing and the advent of television awakened advertisers’ interest in children’s consumer socialization. Such technological and economic determinism, however, obscures a host of

earlier efforts to inculcate brand consciousness, ranging from school enrichment materials and advertising jingle boos to magazine and radio advertising” (Jacobson, 2004, p. 17). In their reconstruction of the birth of the child-consumer the studies consider the social conditioning exerted by the mass media, especially through publicity, scholastic curricula, which range from thrift education to consumer education, or learning the value of the differed gratification that comes from responsible spending.

In contemporary consumer society the supervision and education traditionally exercised by primary networks and groups is being substituted by “that of the mass media structures of networks connect with the distribution and sale of objects” (Secondulfo 2012a, p. 287). Individuals, children included, find themselves ever more targeted by the strategies of sales and advertising while also gaining autonomy, the feeling of being ‘free’, from the tradition primary structures of authority. The family remains central to the socialization process. This is true above all in its role as a transmitter of the consumption practices through which new generations are educated to be responsible about their purchasing choices, as in the case of the socialization into ‘critical consumption’ practices (Leonini & Sassatelli, 2008). Conversely, the family is losing its control over purchasing choices and strategies. Therefore, while the family has remained one of the main forces of socialization, and of the construction of habitus, its role as a guide has weakened in the face of the numerous institutions of consumer socialization and the mass media industry’s targeting of the individual in their advertising and sales campaigns.

Within a social framework defined by individualism, Barber (2007) identifies an *ethos* of infantilization as the defining spirit of contemporary society. He notes that his description is “both vague and pointed, a powerful metaphor, which on the one hand points to a decrease in the level (quality) of goods and purchasers in a postmodern global economy, an economy that seems to produce more goods than needed while targeting children as consumers in a market in which there are always too few” (Barber 2007, p. 8). Without a doubt the infantilizing of the consumer was, and still is, part of a market strategy reinforced by the perpetuation of the New (Setiffi, 2009; Secondulfo, 2012a), by the impossible need to fulfill each desire, and the individualism that finds its complete realization in the consumer society. Barber’s criticism of the capitalist system is based on the transformation of free citizens into manipulated clients. The rise of individualism is certainly one of the most important aspects of the shift to a

consumer society: “developments in employment, urbanization and in particular the growth of the service industry, changes in the earning power of women [...] all greatly contributed to the collapse of the more patriarchal and unified family; a model threatened by the individualistic force of the consumer world, which targets isolated individuals in order to optimize its sales” (Secondulfo 2012a, p. 286).

In consumer society, individual choices reach the height of their expression as they gain autonomy from the choices of the family. Individual happiness is pursued through the symbolic and communicative manipulation of material culture, as a means of expressing one’s personal and social identity. Indeed, one of the emblems of consumer society is the construction of a personal lifestyle, a means of expressing oneself that, together with the concept of social class, allows for the stratification of consumption behaviors and practices (Secondulfo, 2012b; Setiffi, 2013). Lifestyle is “a form of individual expression, detached from structures of authority and the homogeneity of ascribed social groups, like relatives or family. It is associated with an orientation toward projected social groups, real and imaginary, to which one feels tied by affinities that are expressed, above all, through consumption and purchasing choices. One is free to enter and leave these social groups at any moment.” (Secondulfo 2012a, p. 286).

In today’s society, lifestyle is fluid. It can be adapted to suit the changing times and gives a greater level of responsibility to the subject in the process of constructing an identity through material culture. Lifestyle is the empirical proof of the individual’s detachment from primary networks. While lifestyle represents a source of liberation from the norms and restrictions imposed by the family, allowing the subject a form of liberal self-expression, it also leaves a relational void that weakens the sense of belonging to a community and favors the isolation of the subject (Secondulfo 2001, 2002a). This is the “burden” of individualism that characterizes the construction of one’s personal and social identity in consumer society.

### **Consumer Socialization: a sociological approach**

Marketing experts were the first scholars to give significant attention to the question of consumer socialization. Scott Ward writes: “consumer

socialization is defined here as processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2). According to Ward, the skills, knowledge and attitudes directly relevant to the market are those needed for the “enactment of the consumer role” skills at budgeting, pricing, knowledge of brand attitude and shopping outlets, and attitude toward “products, brands and sales people”; whereas those indirectly necessary function in response to social expectations - the motivations for purchased. After providing a definition of consumer socialization, Ward explains that the transfer of direct and indirect knowledge is only partially attributable to the enhancement of the role of the consumer since the purchasing process is primarily based on social pressures and conditioning.

Ward’s definition (1974) highlights how the process of consumer socialization allows the subject to interact in a functional manner within the market. The acquisition of the knowledge described by Ward is completely in line with the marketing scholarship of the 1970s<sup>1</sup>. Writing about consumer socialization today, keeping in mind that consumption is both a social and a collective practice and not merely an instrument for individual appropriation (Zelizer, 2002, 2011), we approach the entire process of consumer socialization from a broader prospective. The concept of “socialization into the world of goods” refers to a long process in which the individual internalizes the norms, values and practices expressed in the processes of consumption and exhibited through the goods and objects symbolizing his personal and social identity. The purchasing choices and the symbolic meanings embodied in the goods and negotiated according to the expressive needs of the subject, are emblematic of his life-choices and social position. Bourdieu (1979) reminds us of the family’s influence on the construction of taste and *habitus*. Although we are all consumers in Western society, and as such we are all in some way socialized to live in the world of goods, it is also true that we all consume in a different way because: “when we make purchases and use goods we repeat and retain the practical behavior and normative patterns that we have developed over the course of our lifetime beginning from our particular position within the social structure” (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 172).

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<sup>1</sup> The present article will not consider the differences between the theories of marketing and sociology, which are relevant but beyond my objectives here.



Numerous studies have investigated the purchasing strategies of the family, from both an economic and a sociological perspective. Above all the sociological approach, as Codeluppi notes (2008, p. 122), has “generated the most interesting results for our understanding of the family’s influence on consumption habits [...] and the role of the housewife within the family structure”. This perspective has been adopted to investigate the distribution of power in purchasing decisions; a factor that has undergone profound changes with the growth of women’s participation in the labor market, providing for more balance and equality in the mechanisms of choice, management of the household and consumption. As Di Nicola notes, family is a “plural noun”. As the life-trajectories of individuals change, so do the way families are constructed. New dynamics of balance are formed alongside the old asymmetries of the traditional couple. This change in relationships within the family structure has repercussions for the lifestyle and education of children, and above all for the role of the minor in relation to his parents and their relationship. Starting from a perspective more focused on consumption, the studies of Miller (1998) - on shopping as an act of love and care toward the family - and Douglas (1992) - on the “defense of shopping” - contextualize purchasing choices and motivations within a relational structure in which consumption is emblematic of a shared set of social meanings.

In his book, *Come i bambini diventano consumatori (How Children Become Consumers, 2010)*, Ironico adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the fields of sociology, psychology and marketing in order to understand different forms of consumer socialization and the processes by which children and adults learn to become consumers. The author claims that children and adolescents take on the role of consumers through exposure to both *environmental influences* (from products, places of consumption, and advertising and marketing campaigns), and *social influences* (from the family, peer groups, educators and teachers, the mass media and marketers). These two types of conditioning have an effect on the cognitive, affective and behavioral development of the subject and are related above all to the acquisition of knowledge and values about consumption and purchasing practices and behaviors. Ironico (2010) approaches the problem from two points of view. Firstly, from a *Consumer Socialization* perspective, based primarily on marketing studies; and secondly, from the perspective of *Consumer Development*, adapted from a socio-psychological approach. In both cases, she shows how the

consumer's role develops within a larger socialization process in which practices and behaviors foundational to lifestyle are transmitted.

As already mentioned by Bourdieu, *habitus* is the 'foundational formula responsible for generating lifestyle' and is learned by the individual from the family and the educational system during his formative years. Although *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* is certainly a fundamental text for the study of consumer socialization, today's interest in the argument is in reaction to the influence which consumer behavior and culture have gained within the overall process of identity construction. The social recognition required by the consumer can be traced both to a need to feel accepted as a member of the collectivity and to the necessity to use consumption as an instrument of personal identity construction.

As Belotti has extensively noted (2013) there is still very little sociological scholarship on childhood that focuses on the role of consumption in the life of a child and in his relationship with adults<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, since the 70s marketing research has consistently focused on the question, offering an initial definition of consumer socialization which underlined the consumption strategies internal to the family and the influence that children exert on the family's purchasing choices (Mauri, 1996). Later, marketing scholarship researched an increase in the child-consumer's autonomy of choice and began directly addressing both its market research and product-positioning to the world of children. The study led by Belotti (2013) and collected in the volume *Negoziare i consumi. Voci, esperienze e rappresentazioni di bambini e genitori (Negotiating consumption. The voices, experiences and representations of children and parents)* successfully establishes a solution to the dualistic vision of the child as both a subject manipulated by advertising strategies and a minor capable of exploiting his subservient parents. As such the study is aimed at negotiating the great "ambivalence" of the consumer behavior and attitudes of children (Belotti, 2013). This ambivalence exists between "a capacity to critically interpret and manage marketing messages and a passivity towards messages aimed at selling products and brands. These messages are intended to instill consumption activities and habits and view children as

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the evolution of Sociological scholarship on childhood, see Colombo M. (2002). From the side of the children. The challenge of childhood studies to sociology of education. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 3, 138-144. Retrieved from [http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2012\\_3\\_7.pdf](http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2012_3_7.pdf)

consumers capable of generating, directly or indirectly, new products for the market” (Belotti, 2013, p. 16). By extension listening to the “voices” of children also involves considering the relationships between parents and children; relationships in which the children are subjects in the process of growing, ambivalently creative and predictable, economically dependent on the family and exposed to influences from the media aimed at influencing the construction of their lifestyles. Studying the practices that make up the negotiatory “dance” and subdivision of responsibility within the family, involves analyzing the “articulated consumption strategies of persuasion, resistance and submission, credits for future purchases or debts involving the renouncement of future consumption, all negotiated through language” (Belotti, 2013, p. 18) The ambivalence which Belotti investigates leads to an image of the child-consumer which is “neither that of the child at the mercy of his parents’ unwavering consumption habits, nor that of the child-king who rules over his oppressed parents, overcome by his ever more consumerist disposition” (Belotti, 2013, p. 28). Instead it is shown a different representation of how parents and children see their own power. In this hall of mirrors consumption is contextualized within the spaces of domesticity, parental responsibility and daily life practices of recognition, ability, rights and knowledge are generated through economic action.

### **The Commercialization of Childhood**

Two of the most fruitful and interesting avenues of research on child consumption to date have investigated: 1) how gender construction is mediated through advertising; 2) and how junk food is aggressively advertised to minors in the mass media. Gender differences are projected in the differences between goods consumed by male children and female children, as well as in the manner in which objects are consumed, with certain behaviors being appropriate to or coherent with one sex or the other (Sassatelli, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. Following scholarship which underlined the socialization into masculine and feminine gender roles (Gianini Belotti, 1973), with particular attention to the market of baby products (Seiter,

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<sup>3</sup> Sassatelli defines gender differences as: “social and cultural differences organized according to a binary logic of belonging to either one or the other of the two sexual classes: male or female.” (Sassatelli, 2005, p. 172).

1993; Kline, 1994; Gunter & Furnham, 1998), Sassatelli observes how male and female children tend to “negotiate their gender identities through toys embodying strong ideas of femininity, masculinity and the relationship between the sexes” (Sassatelli, 2005, p. 172); a form of socialization that works through dominant consumption models that are typical of mass society, and which often embody stereotypical ideas about masculine and feminine roles.

Also of particular interest with regard to the social influences that ‘shape’ the body of the child-consumers, are studies on the commercialization of childhood. The pressure that institutions exert on minors through the use of programmed advertising campaigns, forces them into adopting consumption behaviors capable of influencing their health and the relationship they have with their bodies, in particular with regard to the consumption of “junk” food. According to Ruskin and Schor (2005) food consumption by minors has changed dramatically over the years, as a consequence of two factors in particular: an increase in products for infant consumers, from candies and snacks to food eaten out, as well as an increase in the amount child-consumers are exposed to the mass media, making them a particularly interesting target for the advertising industry, especially poor children and minorities.

In addition to the specific consequences, stemming from consumption - the purchase and abuse of particular goods, like junk food, or the influence the mass media in has in reproducing gender stereotypes - it is also possible to observe the impact of the commercialization of childhood on the quality of life of children.

The meticulous research carried out by Juliet Schor in her book *Born to Buy* (2004) begins to address this question. Her research was carried out in two phases: the first, a qualitative study, involved interviewing and observing experts of marketing and advertising for children’s products; the second part was a quantitative study of school children, with the objective of investigating how the consumer becomes involved in the culture of consumption. Her work brilliantly and accurately reveals how the commercialization of childhood has intensified. This study followed two previous publications of hers: *The Overworked American Society* (1993) and *The Overspent American Society* (1998). The first detailed the characteristics of a work culture trapped in a vicious “work/spend” cycle in which compensation paid for extra hours derives from the consumption of material goods. The second described the pressure placed on American

families to consume, a phenomenon that results in a worsening of the quality of life. Schor (2004) demonstrates how the increased commercialization of childhood has resulted in a decrease in wellbeing and the quality of life of children brought about by the excess consumption, of unhealthy food, electronic media, drugs and alcohol together with an exasperated and instrumental use of anxiety in advertising messages. Schor (2004) speaks of an incessant increase in the commercialization of childhood and its intensification in a social system in which consumerism functions as a response to an excess pressure to work.

A study by Buckingham (2007) takes a different position on the commercialization of childhood. The study does not view children as minors subjugated to the logic of the market, nor does it consider the act of consumption to be a form of free expression on the part of minors. For Buckingham, the child is not defenseless in the face of advertising pressures nor is he free from the conditioning exerted from the various institutions of socialization. Indeed, he proposes viewing consumer socialization as part of the broader relational space of the minor, to include the mass media and school, as well as the family and peer groups. Pugh (2009) follows a similar line of study, basing her research on the relational networks of minors built around family, friends and teachers. These networks are decisive for the development of the relationship between the body and material culture, inevitably mediated by the action of consumption, considered both in terms of the socialization into consumer behavior and the pressure to purchase coming from marketing and advertising. Though Pugh (2009) recognizes the influence exercised by commercial advertising campaigns that target minors and adolescents, she proposes studying consumption as part of the meaning construction processes of children, which borrow from the cultural setting proposed by the market without replicating it.

Aware that these studies give greater weight to different forces of socialization in the cognitive development of children, and knowing as well that the family still plays a key role in the food education of children, Schor's research (2004) demonstrates very clearly how the advertising pressure to consume junk food is particularly effective among poor social classes, multiplying the inequalities of health (Maturò, 2014). Above all, such processes of mass consumption run the risk of accelerating forms of inequality between poor and rich families, demonstrating how different

ways of consuming the same goods can create forms of social distinction and inequality.

### **Recognizing Consumption as a Form of Socialization**

As child, youth and adult-consumers we live immersed in a world of goods and objects that we use more or less consciously in order to form our social and personal identities. The social world is populated by goods and objects which children, from infancy, begin recognizing as a form of prosthesis, functional to the fulfillment of his social role. As a child grows, toys become more and more interactive, stimulating cognitive functions. They are one of the first “pieces” of material culture that we encounter in the long evolution of the child-consumer. In addition to these pieces of material culture a child encounters: the domestic and scholastic spaces where roles are transmitted; different spaces of power and negotiation; and spaces of consumer socialization, like points of sale (interpretable as informal spaces of education) where practices of co-shopping involving parents and children are elaborated (Keller & Russ, 2014).

In Maria Montessori's (1912) well - known book, *The Montessori Method*, the material culture of schools – and in particular, the interior design of schools - allows one to observe Montessori's paradigm of education: “The principal modification in the matter of school furnishings is the abolition of desks, and benches or stationary chairs. I have had tables made with wide, solid, octagonal legs, spreading in such a way that the tables are at the same time solidly firm and very light, so light, indeed, that two four-year-old children can easily carry them about... The doors of these cupboards open easily, and the care of the materials is confided to the children” (Montessori, 1912, p. 82). Montessori's approach to education, which revolves around the child and his education and which discourages the imposition of prohibitions and norms in the form of direct intervention from the teacher, provides an interesting point of observation for reflecting on the effects of consumer socialization. As I have stressed in previous studies (Setiffi, 2013, 2014) the polarization of consumption as either a space of social annulment or one of identity expression only leads us to a dead-end. One way to overcome this duality might be to begin locating consumption in relation to identity construction and requests for recognition on the part of the subject, with the awareness that the uncritical

consumer socialization characterizing the childhood phase is marked by the ever more pervasive influence of marketing and advertising pressures.

While recognizing that the act of consumption has the power to mold identity, to influence it and at times allow the market to prepackage identities in line with one's self-image can lead to an underestimation of the subjective power of consumption practices, the manipulative effects of advertising campaigns on childhood, in particular in relation to the socialization of food consumption, are undeniable. The results of studies recently conducted in the United States (Schor, 2004; Ruskin & Schor, 2005; Schor & Ford, 2007; Bakan, 2012) demonstrate how the chronic health problems of children and the increase in childhood obesity are in part due to the commercialization of dangerous food and drink products, which are ever more present in schools: "companies plaster their ads, logos, and messages on classroom, cafeteria, and gym walls, textbook covers, screen savers bulletin boards, scoreboards, the sides and insides of school buses, rooftops, and so on" (Bakan, 2012, p. 46). The shift of market control from production to distribution structures makes it so that the consumer, children included, are targeted more and more, as companies appeal to aspirations and forms collective recognition.

On the other hand, studying consumption as an action capable of maximizing individual choice and freeing us from the strategies of the market, aimed at maximizing profit, underestimates the market's ability to influence consumer decisions. This would mean extending the notion of "the sovereignty of the consumer" to a position of control over the actions of companies in the industry of marketing and advertisement. Instead, though we can recognize the influence that consumers may have over a business's adoption of certain socially responsible behaviors, the logic governing its production and distribution are often disconnected from the value system of the consumer.

A first step towards moving beyond a polarized view of the consumer as either an instrument of social manipulation or an entity of unfettered identity expression is to distinguish between different forms of consumption, to which we can associate different forms of recognition. For every subject, children included, consumption is a source of social recognition. Of all of the practices associated with defining one's subjectivity, consumption allows us to most clearly define the processes by which a subject seeks recognition within the corpus of society. We have established the inescapability of the process of socialization into familial

consumption behaviors, which are mediated by the market, transmitted in school and conditioned by peer groups according to the dialectic homologation-differentiation. Now we must define possible avenues and strategies of research for understanding the culture of consumption understood more and more, not just as the expression of the identity of a subject, but rather of forms of social inequality that are initially transmitted from the family. Studying consumption and its socialization processes means reflecting on the forms of social conditioning which affect the development of subjectivity, as well as understanding what to do in order to limit the cases of obesity tied to bad eating habits learned through the family, similar to the socialization and education of habits of financial responsibility (Ruspini, 2008; Rinaldi, 2013), of the use of new media (Pattaro, 2006, 2007; Scanagatta & Segatto, 2007; Riva, 2014), toward responsible lifestyles (Leonini & Sassatelli, 2008; Santoro, 2008) and more generally of the promotion of a reflexive culture, capable of contextualizing choices and legitimate hedonistic impulses within a general idea of individual and collective wellbeing (Paltrinieri, 2012).

A second step involves addressing the theme of consumer education, aware of the powerful influence that social communication processes tied to the world of material culture have on identity construction. Addressing consumption as part of education, including it in the larger body of sociological scholarship on education, with the intention of studying the relationship between education, society, subjects, contexts and educational practices (see: Maccarini, 2003; Colombo, 2006; Besozzi, 2006; Ribolzi, 2012) means both recognizing in the processes of consumption the need for identity recognition, always more closely tied to the world of goods and services, and considering transformations in one's "life path in a reflexive sense" (Maccarini, 2011). Martens (2005) notes that one of the biggest problems in investigating consumer education is that children and parents are treated as homogeneous social entities, and that certainly as consumers "they are treated as a black box". From this it becomes clear why it is necessary to put educational strategies in action that are capable of mitigating the influence of the relational context on the formation of future citizens and consumers.



## Conclusion

The article presents research and reflections on consumer socialization with the aim of underlining the importance of creating a space for economic action and the processes of consumption within the larger process of socialization. The inevitability of becoming consumers through the purchase, possession and consumption of goods and services creates the need to reflect on the role played by the institutions of education and socialization that implicitly and explicitly condition our values and practices of consumption. According to Martens, Southerton and Scott (2004), the sociology of consumption has given little attention to the role of the child-consumer in contemporary society while the sociology of childhood would tend to see the child from a perspective the authors define as “consumption production” based primarily on the influence of media and the market. According to the same authors it is possible to define three approaches in scholarship related to the sociology of consumption: 1) *mode of consumption* “that highlights the significance of objective (economic, cultural and social capital) and subjective (identification through shared orientations towards consumption embedded in habitus) constraints in shaping what and how different social groups consume” (Martens, Southerton, & Scott, 2004, p. 173); 2) *lifestyle and identity formation* “with attention paid to the theories of individual autonomous consumers” and “3) *engagement with material culture* based on “how children personalize objects, and the work that both they and their parents put into the act of consuming are of particular interest” (Martens, Southerton, & Scott, 2004, p. 174). From an approach more concerned with understanding the importance of different forms of capital in the formation of lifestyle adopted in many studies with particular attention to the role played by cultural capital in assigning form and content to consumption (Bennet, et al., 2009; Warde & Bennett, 2008; Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999), we move to an approach which emphasizes the role of agency in the processes of construction of the individual, until arriving at an understanding of how goods and objects come to be considered indispensable containers of social meaning and mediators of the process of socialization. This arrangement reveals the necessity to carry out research that begins with social practices, without losing sight of the pressure exerted by the mass media, present from its establishment in the twentieth century but ever more pervasive in the last decades.

Recognizing in consumption a function of meaning construction and practices of promoting active citizenship (Paltrinieri & Parmiggiani, 2007; Degli Esposti, 2009; Forno, 2011; Forno & Graziano, 2014) means giving it a social function, making it more than just an instrument of individual gratification. This also means paving the way for a study of the processes of consumer socialization and education that would take into consideration the particularity of the object of study, in constant tension between hedonistic impulses and social responsibility. Considering the numerous studies concerned with widening the role of the consumer, nearly to that of the citizen, investigating the consumer's role in the consumer socialization processes mediated by the family and the school means reflecting on the possibility of constructing new forms of prevention, of social responsibility and active citizenship beginning with the first steps taken by an individual in society.

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