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## A Humanistic Approach to Understanding Child Consumer Socialization in US Homes


Lucy Atkinson

Michelle R. Nelson

Mark A. Rademacher

*Butler University*, [mrademac@butler.edu](mailto:mrademac@butler.edu)

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# **A Humanistic Approach to Understanding Child Consumer Socialization in US Homes**

**Lucy Atkinson**

**Michelle R. Nelson**

**Mark A. Rademacher**

## **Abstract:**

We present findings from a qualitative, multisite, multi-method, longitudinal study of parents and their preschool-aged children that explores the intersections of marketing influences in the home and in the larger outside world of children. Findings indicate that preschoolers represent complicated and nuanced

“consumers in training” beyond predictions based on their “perceptual stage of development.”

Specifically, our data revealed interesting ways in which marketing and consumer culture can foster a number of pro-social consumer outcomes (e.g., charity, gift-giving, financial literacy). We also noted an emerging understanding by preschoolers of the social meanings of goods for identity construction and product evaluation. Finally, through a presentation of an idiographic case, we show how consumer socialization cannot be attributed to one factor such as media but is based on multiple and concurrent factors—parents, siblings, peers, and home environment—that act to moderate, mediate, and provide meaning for marketing messages.

**Keywords:** preschool children, consumer socialization, qualitative method, ethnography, pro-social consumption, social identity of consumption, consumer behavior, parental influence

Children are exposed to an array of marketing content, on everything from iPads and school buses to pillowcases and lunchboxes. The family home offers little respite from these commercial messages, with media campaigns targeting today's children more frequently, in more places and at younger ages than in the previous generations (Common Sense Media, 2014).

This commercialization of childhood rightly raises concerns about deleterious effects, for example by encouraging materialism and parent–child conflicts. These effects have been studied empirically (see for example Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Cairns, Angus, Hastings, & Caraher, 2013; Morarity & Harrison, 2008; Oprea, Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, & Valkenburg, 2013), demonstrating statistical relationships between media exposure in the home, usually television, and children's behaviors (e.g., Harrison, Liechty, & Program, 2011) and parents' roles in mediating media–child viewing and behaviors (e.g., Gentile, Reimer, Nathanson, Walsh, & Eisenmann, 2014). Yet the opportunity to understand the *meaning* of consumption practices, to *witness* the actual behavior in the marketplace, to view the multiple contextual influences and lived experiences of consumer socialization can sometimes be lost with solely experimental or survey approaches. Although causality and correlational relationships are gained with quantitative methods, the external validity, the richness of data, and the view of child as an active participant and not merely a research object (McNamee & Seymour, 2013) provide new ways of understanding consumer socialization. Studies of young consumers should allow for more qualitative, experiential methods of data collection (Rubenzahl, 2011).

Some qualitative scholarship with young children has been conducted. For example, researchers have observed young children and their parents in retail environments (Ironico, 2012; Kinsky & Bichard, 2011), yet if researchers are interested in the home environment, then they could spend extended periods of time with children and families in their homes (Kerrane, Hogg, & Bettany, 2012). Similarly, although studies have consistently shown that parents have a great influence on children's consumer socialization, particularly through communication styles and parental mediation (Buijzen & Mens, 2007; Carlson, Walsh, Lacznia, & Grossbart, 1994; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Nathanson, 1999, 2002; Nathanson & Botta, 2003), the structure and nature of “family” and the people in and around the home have changed in the past 30 years [e.g., single-parent families, extended family child-rearing, delayed marriage, and child-rearing; (Flurry, 2007)]. Given changes in home-life and media-life, it is time to observe consumer socialization in today's child's home environment.

Just as important, many studies of childhood and consumption focus on children at the older end of the age spectrum, from elementary school on, and not on preschoolers (McNamee & Seymour, 2013). And yet very young children represent a desirable demographic to marketers (Hill, 2011) with TV channels and websites like BabyTV.com aimed at children three and younger (Shields & Johnston, 2008). To enhance this body of literature, we argue that a holistic contextually relevant approach to early childhood consumer socialization is warranted. Specifically, we argue for a humanistic, qualitative multi-method approach to study marketing and childhood consumer socialization in the home environment.

Our manuscript is grounded in the assumption that re-evaluating conceptual and methodological issues regarding children, family, and marketing is important (for similar claims see de la Ville &

Tartas, 2010; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Lachance & Legault, 2007; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). As demonstrated by Gilligan's (1993), re-examination of children's moral development, revisiting well-established assumptions with a fresh eye and new approaches can have far-reaching implications. To support our claims, we draw on data collected from a qualitative, multisite, multi-method, longitudinal study we conducted in the United States among parents and their preschool children that enabled us to spend an extended period of time with informants in their home, in the grocery store, and in a big-box retail environment.

### **Toward a More Holistic Model of Preschoolers and Consumer Socialization in the Home**

Marketers target today's children more frequently, in more places and at younger ages than in the previous generations. In a year, a child will see as many as 40,000 advertisements, half of which are TV ads and make 3,000 requests for products and services (Common Sense Media, 2014; Schor, 2004). The home offers no break from this marketing onslaught. In addition to the obvious sources of advertising on TV and other screen media, children are exposed to brand names, logos, and spokescharacters on a host of household items, ranging from cereal to clothing. For marketers, young consumers are a highly sought after, profitable segment. One advertising firm estimated children's and teens' buying power at \$1.2 trillion (White, 2013).

When it comes to understanding marketing impacts on these very young children (operationalized here as preschool-aged), a number of assumptions have informed the field's general research trajectory. First, it is assumed that very young children are cognitively limited; this argument positions preschoolers as egocentric, perceptual beings with very limited understanding of consumer culture and persuasive media (John, 1999). As a result of these cognitive deficiencies, it is assumed that marketing influences like advertising and branding operate differently with young children. The assumption is that advertising and other persuasive forms of communication either have very minimal effects, given preschoolers' assumed limited stage of cognitive development (John, 1999), or have very direct and powerful effects (for example, see Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, & Rojas, 1991). This theoretical approach ignores the complex contextual and familial influences, such as siblings, that moderate and mediate message effects (Cotte & Wood, 2004) and discount any agency that young people might have in influencing their social environments (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). We argue that this contextual approach should be explicitly applied to the study of young audiences as well. Even young media consumers have agency and are capable of understanding persuasive communication in multiple ways.

### **Models of Consumer Socialization and the Very Young**

Socialization refers to the process whereby individuals acquire and develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as members of a culture, which in turn helps society function by reinforcing norms, customs, ideologies, and values it considers important. Conventional views of early childhood development and socialization tend to take an "ages-and-stages" approach (e.g., John, 1999; Moschis, 2007). Socialization is traditionally conceptualized as most intense during childhood, helping to lay the foundation for ongoing socialization through the life course (Moschis, 2007; Piaget, 1929).

Recent developments in the sociology of childhood (James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 2005) offer a more holistic, less rigid approach to understanding childhood socialization in general, which can be fruitfully applied to the context of consumer socialization in particular. The sociology of childhood perspective views childhood as a social construction, and hence a social institution “both constructed and reconstructed both for and by children” (Prout & James, 2005, p. 7). In many ways, the new sociology of childhood seeks to erase the perspective that children are socially and cognitively immature beings moving toward maturity, as posited by the ages-and-stages perspective, by giving voices to children and allowing them to describe their experiences in their own terms, free from the constraints imposed on them by adults and scholars.

This perspective is a useful counterpoint to the more commonly used socialization models grounded in cognitive development. For example, Piaget's psychological approach emphasizes children's age-related cognitive development as they move through four stages of development. Such models have impacted consumer socialization studies for more than 40 years. John's (1999) comprehensive review and analysis, for instance, results in a three-stage consumer-socialization model based on Piaget's thinking. She posits that children move from the perceptual stage (3–7 years old) as “simple, expedient and egocentric” (p. 187) consumer decision-makers to more thoughtful and systematic consumers in the analytical stage (7–11 years), and finally, emerge with sophisticated information processing and social skills capable of nuanced decision-making during the reflective stage (11–16 years). While common, such “ages-and-stages” approaches have been critiqued on many fronts.

In their summary of the new sociology of childhood, for instance, Prout and James (2005) argue that childhood is not synonymous with biological immaturity; rather it is a social construction and a variable in social analysis. Likewise, they argue children are active participants in their lives rather than mere passive subjects (see also James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 2005). Another critique argues that developmental models are time bound, requiring continuous updating to account for cultural change (Cook, 2008; Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005), such as changing parental roles, increased media exposure, and evolving social networks. Moreover, although Piaget acknowledged the role of environmental sources such as family, peers, and media in cognitive development, “ages-and-stages” research often minimizes the influence of these agents on consumer socialization (Cross, 2002; Martens, Southerton, & Scott, 2004). This is especially true when considering individuals such as peers, parents, and other adults who may play a mentoring role in both cognitive and social developmental processes (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011, p. 335).

A handful of studies have sought to chip away at the dominance of the cognitive ages-and-stages model. For example, in their non-empirical essay, Moses and Baldwin (2005) used theory of mind to argue that preschoolers, given sufficient exposure, are capable of distinguishing between advertising content and regular programming on TV and can understand the persuasive intent of advertising. Also using theory of mind, McAlister and Cornwell (2010) have shown that preschoolers are capable of recognizing brand names and understanding them as social symbols. Similarly, extant literature on preschoolers' persuasion knowledge argues that most preschoolers can recognize brands (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010) and advertising, but are unaware that ads can be misleading, biased, and self-serving (e.g., Levin, Petros, & Petrella, 1982).

The case for revisiting accepted socializing benchmarks is strong. Contemporary culture is more consumer-oriented than in past generations and mass media are more pervasive, interactive, and targeted (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005). Some parents are more consumer savvy than in previous generations and are more likely to engage in active mediation and discussion with their children. Contemporary children are also increasingly growing up in nontraditional family structures (Dotson & Hyatt, 2000; Neeley, 2005) and moving between numerous social contexts within the course of their daily lives (Corsaro, 2003; Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Although parents, especially mothers, are consistently identified as primary socialization agents (Carlson et al., 1994), others have argued that peers play an equal role in children's socialization (e.g., Youniss, 1980). As young children spend increasing amounts of time interacting with peers, whether in informal (e.g., play dates, at the playground) or formal settings (e.g., daycare, school, athletics), it becomes necessary for socialization models to account for peer culture influence, the associated social practices and artifacts, and the resultant tensions that may arise between adult- and peer-oriented socialization messages.

Scholarship must recognize and account for the fact that young children simultaneously inhabit two, “intricately interwoven” cultures—adults' and children's (Corsaro, 2003, p. 37). In addressing these contemporary changes, we draw on the perspective advocated in the sociology of childhood in which children are viewed as active individuals within a particular social reality, one that they create and manipulate individually and collectively in partnership with, and at times opposition to, the larger adult world (Prout & James, 2005). In this light, we agree with Prout and James (2005) that children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of examination and that ethnography represents a valuable research method for uncovering children's meanings and interpretations of their lived experiences (Prout & James, 2005).

We rely on this perspective and extend it in two ways. First, we focus on very young consumers, an age that has been the focus of less attention compared with children who have already entered formal schooling. While there are studies that explore preschoolers as consumers (Borzekowski & Robinson, 2001; Derscheid, Kwon, & Fang, 1996; Haynes, Burts, Dukes, & Cloud, 1993; McAlister & Cornwell, 2009), they tend to be quantitative, drawing on surveys or experiments; our data represent one of the few attempts to capture preschooler attitudes and behaviors from the vantage point of the preschooler. Second, we apply this sociological approach to consumer socialization and the under-analyzed area of pro-social consumption outcomes. Much of the literature on consumer socialization and marketplace learning takes a defensive stance, arguing that the hallmark of successful socialization is an ability to deflect and overcome marketers' persuasive attempts. Rarely is consumer socialization thought of in terms of pro-social or normatively valuable outcomes (e.g., saving money, environmental consciousness, identity formation).

Given these changing social and institutional forces faced by contemporary children, we present an analysis of how today's preschoolers are socialized into consumer culture. We are motivated by the following overarching research question: From a sociology of childhood perspective, in what ways are contemporary preschoolers socialized into consumer culture and how might these be different from the dominant cognitively based ages-and-stages approach? We focus particularly

on the multiplicity of factors (parents, siblings, peers, mass media, etc.) that influence socialization and the pro-social outcomes that develop.

## **Method**

Our study is a response to Rubenzahl's (2011) and Ekström's (2006) calls for data collection that allows for more qualitative, experiential methods. If researchers are interested in the home environment, then they could spend extended periods of time with children in their home environment and with children and their families as they navigate real commercial settings. This approach improves existing methodological practices by privileging the child's perspective, witnessing events as they occur rather than relying on parental recall of children's attitudes and values (Haynes et al., 1993). Further, our insights are developed after spending a number of hours with the children and their families in the home and retail environments. Although young children can represent difficult informants, we agree with Bandura's arguments that emphasize the agency and autonomy of young people, a perspective that suggests even young children are capable of understanding and influencing their environments, including consumer culture (Bandura, 1989). Similarly, we also sought to avoid the constraints of survey and experimental approaches. Although useful, these quantitative techniques rely on highly constrained questioning oftentimes in artificial settings that can limit the detail, depth, and external validity of the findings.

In an effort to resolve these constraints, we relied on a longitudinal, multisite, multi-method approach that included observations and in-depth interviews with parent–child dyads over three encounters. The first meeting was in the home and included time spent in the child's bedroom or primary playroom; the other two encounters were shopping ethnographies. The researchers accompanied parents and children on two separate shopping trips (a routine food buying trip and a visit to a big-box store to buy a gift for the child and a gift for a friend). Data were collected by the three authors over 12 months from mid-2011 to mid-2012 at three sites over three different points in time. Interview sites included a large city in the Midwest (population 1.7 million), a large city in the Southwest (population 1.8 million), and a midsized city in the Midwest (population 231,000) in the United States. Informants were recruited through parent groups and daycare centers. The only eligibility requirement for participation was that parents have a child between the ages of 3 and 5, our focal age group. Informants were offered a financial incentive to participate: \$50 for the interview, \$30 for the first shopping ethnography, and \$20 for the second shopping ethnography. Our sample consisted of 23 parent–child dyads (see Table 1), and every dyad completed each research stage for a retention rate of 100%. The sample ranged in ethnicity, religiosity, and occupation, yet all of the informants were born and socialized in the United States. All interviews were transcribed and detailed field notes and photos of the home environments were taken, which resulted in more than 500 single-spaced pages of text. The combination of interview and observational data gave us insight into the quotidian moments and lived challenges of parents and their children in contemporary consumer culture.

**Table 1 Informant demographics**

Child, gender (age)	Parent <sup>a</sup> , gender (age)	Ethnicity	Occupation	Partner occupation (age)	# Siblings (gender)
<i>Southwest, Metro</i>					
Levy, M (5)	Carmen, F (38)	White	Sign language interpreter	Database manager (38)	–
Dion, M (5)	Jessica, F (40)	White	Photographer, SAHM <sup>b</sup>	Art director (43)	–
Brian, M (5)	Michelle, F (39)	White	SAHM (former therapist)	Law student (39)	1 F
Ryan, M (4)	Florence, F (28)	Hispanic	Paramedic	Engineer/grad student (29)	–
Braden, M (3)	Denise, F (38)	White	SAHM (former teacher)	Construction (41)	2 M, 1 F
Hannah, F (5)	Pam, F (35)	White	Photographer	Software developer (34)	1 F
Amanda, F (5)	Dawn, F (44)	White	SAHM	Software developer (45)	2 M
Lauren, F (4)	Helen, F (34)	White	Architect	Car salesman (32)	2 M
Megan, F (4)	Jamila, F (43)	White	Software developer	Hospice care (41)	1 F
Raylee, F (3)	Katie, F (41)	White	Lawyer	Software developer (37)	1 M
<i>Midwest, Metro</i>					
Emma, F (3)	Amy, F (31)	White	SAHM	Commercial airline pilot (37)	–
Michael, M (4)	Heather, F (30)	White	Social worker	Social worker (n/a)	1 F
Claire, F (3)	Julie, F (35)	White	Part-time theater manager	Business executive (35)	1 F
Ethan, M (5)	Lisa, F (31)	White	SAHM	Non-profit IT manager (29)	1 F
Noah, M (4)	Mary, F (42)	White	SAHM	Wine distributor/musician (43)	1 M
Jacob, M (4)	Melissa, F (25)	Black	Healthcare intake specialist	Photographer (n/a)	1 F
Ava (3)	Nicole, F (39)	White	SAHM/part-time paralegal	Customer service rep (35)	1 M
Jeremiah, M (3)	Stacy, F (52)	Hispanic	SAHM/college student	Shipping/receiving (n/a)	1 F
<i>Midwest, Rural</i>					
Connor, M (3)	Tatiana, F (30)	Black	Plant, Assembly Line	Unknown	3 M, 1 F
Rita <sup>c</sup> , F (3)	Nina, F (34)	White	SAHM	Unemployed	2 M, 4 F
Hilary <sup>c</sup> , F (4)	John, M (34)	Black	Unemployed	SAHM	2 M, 4 F
Jami, M (4)	Diana, F (26)	Black	Nurse	–	1 M, 1 F
Kami, F (3)	Janis, F (32)	Black	Administrative	–	1 F

a Primary parent who participated in the research project. b Stay-at-home mother. c Rita and Hilary are sisters. Each was interviewed separately and with a different parent.



The benefits of an ethnographic approach are many. It focuses on actual behavior in context, rather than retrospective accounts or estimates, helping to minimize inaccuracies in self-reporting and susceptibility to social desirability effects (Rundle-Thiele, 2009; Tein, Roosa, & Michaels, 1994). It allowed us to observe contextual influences in multiple locations to understand how home influences intersect with outside forces, like retail spaces, as demonstrated in the marketing traces on their walls, in their bookcases, and in their toy chests. By spending an extended period of time in the home (about 2 hours), we were able to see our child informants in their “natural” habitat (Reid, 1979). Finally, with our longitudinal method, which included three visits with the families, we were able to clarify questions that arose earlier and verify information that was collected from interviews with observations of actual behavior.

### **Analytical Approach**

The three authors engaged in note-taking, interpretation, and analysis throughout the field data collection. Data were analyzed using the hermeneutic method (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Data were therefore inductively created, analyzed, and understood in a reciprocal relation to the broader context of consumer socialization. For this research, we focused on emerging data related to socialization in the home. Analysis included three specific stages: intra-case analysis, inter-case analysis, and contextualization of the conceptual framework (Thompson, 1997). Personal meanings and observations, as well as reoccurring themes were noted and emerged through an iterative process of analysis across all data. Data were viewed as representing both actual and ideal experiences during the child socialization process (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011), and interpretations were adjusted accordingly. This methodological richness yielded insights about preschoolers and marketing that paints a more complicated and dynamic view of how children understand consumer culture as it is presented to them both inside and outside the home. The next sections illustrate these insights. The first identifies the positive but often overlooked outcomes of preschoolers' interactions with consumer culture; the second describes the multifaceted ways in which children's home environments influence their consumer socialization.

### **Findings**

This study set out to situate childhood consumer socialization within the multiple factors that influence preschoolers' development as consumers and to understand the outcomes of this socialization process in a more holistic way that allows for pro-social orientations as they relate to consumption.

### **Reconceptualizing Very Young Consumers and Socialization Outcomes**

Although the commercialization of childhood raises legitimate concerns among parents and child advocates about the power of media and marketing messages to encourage eating disorders, poor body image, precocious sexuality, aggression, family stress, and materialism (Cox, Skouteris, Rutherford, & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2011; Piachaud, 2008; Schor, 2004), the reality is much more complex. Socializing children into the world of consumption is fundamental to the continuity of market-based societies like the United States and the social institutions that support them (O'Barr, 2008). However, almost without exception, research into the impact of mass media and marketing directed at children focuses on socially reprehensible consequences to the exclusion of any positive

outcomes. Our data revealed interesting ways in which marketing and consumer culture can foster a number of pro-social consumer outcomes among young consumers.

### **Charity and gift giving**

Preschoolers in this preoperational stage of development are said to be ego-centric creatures, unable to distinguish themselves from others. Further, they are said to be eager to own toys and value possessions, but are not necessarily able to understand the social significance or value of objects (John, 1999). Yet, despite their young age and scarce economic resources, some of our informants routinely put money aside for charity or for church. For example, Lauren, 4 years old, showed the interviewer how she divided her allowance into a piggy bank with three different compartments, one for saving, one for spending, and one for charity, which in Lauren and her mom Helen's case meant a contribution to their church. Helen doesn't direct Lauren to choose a particular compartment, but allows Lauren to make up her mind.

Few studies reveal the interest and ability for preschool children to consider giving to others. Our second shopping trip afforded the opportunity to explore the self versus other consideration when we instructed the young shoppers to use the money to buy a toy for themselves and one for another person. Typically, this was not a difficult task for the young shoppers. For example, Hannah, 5 years old, went on the toy-shopping trip with the express purpose of buying a toy that she could donate to her church's charity. She was very clear about wanting to buy three items, one for herself, one for her sister, and one to donate. Her mother, Pam, indicated this was Hannah's own idea and was not the result of parental prodding. In the end, Hannah only had money for two toys and decided to buy the second toy for her sister, rather than for charity, so that her younger sister would not get jealous or be upset.

### **Environmental and country of origin concerns**

Several informants in our sample revealed interest and concern in product origin and materials. For example, they discussed the desire to limit plastic toys, those made in foreign countries and those with potentially harmful components, such as lead paint. Denise prefers her son Braden, 3 years old, play with wooden toys and toys that are not made in China. She is motivated by environmental and personal health concerns. It is unclear whether Braden understands his mother's motives, but it highlights the positive, pro-social outcomes that many mothers strive for within the consumer socialization framework.

Some preschoolers are integrating these value lessons into their own thinking. Amy describes those “proud mommy moments when I am in the dollar section at Target and [Emma]'s like ‘you know what, that's going to break’, and I am like, ‘you are right.’ It's kind of sinking in a little bit.” Likewise, Lisa, a stay-at-home mom, who avoids fast food restaurants due to her strong distaste for processed and unhealthy food, has observed Ethan informing relatives that “you shouldn't eat [McDonald's] because it's disgusting and it's bad for you and it's not even real food.” Ethan even employed his mother's words verbatim when he informed the interviewer that the reason McDonald's food is not real is “because they don't have a cook.” These responses suggest that children continue to be receptive to their parents' socialization messages irrespective of marketers'

persuasive intentions. These observations also highlight the ability of preschool-aged children to evaluate products in a more complex fashion than typically attributed to this age (John, 1999).

### **Financial literacy**

Emerging from our longitudinal research, there were several examples of how parents engage in financial and consumer literacy practices. Past research has suggested that understanding the “significance of money as a medium of exchange” is an important building block for preschoolers' consumer education (Stampfl, Moschis, & Lawton, 1978). Our data indicate these positive consumer socialization outcomes are central to parents' marketing-related conversations and decisions. For example, Janis is a 32-year-old single parent of two children (Kiya age 12, and Kami, age 3). Although they did not have much disposable income, the idea of saving was instilled in her daughter at a young age even if she had some false ideas of where the money came from, which in Kami's case was “pork chop” the piggy bank.

Some of these teachings were conscious. For example, Tatiana, an African American who worked on an assembly line, described her philosophy of spending money and talked about how she tried to instill it in her children:

I'm the type of parent, I get what you need as opposed to what you want. So, if you need a pair of shoes, you get those shoes. If it ain't time for no shoes, you're not gonna get them. I believe in getting new things that are important first; materialistic things fall later. You know, if you want that toy, we gotta pay this light bill first. If the lights ain't on, you can't play in the dark. So it's just all the morals I instill in my kids; it comes from where I came from.

Other forms of literacy unfolded in the marketplace through interactions. For instance, during the second shopping trip, Michelle was helping her son, Brian, 5 years old, choose an appropriately priced toy for his sister by discussing what toys were acceptable (those on the lower shelves) and whether a toy was too expensive. She let Brian navigate the aisles and shelves on this own and stepped in to answer his questions about price and value. Brian eventually settled on a Nerf-type dart gun as a present for his sister because it came with two blasters, meaning he would also be able to play with it with his sister.

Sometimes, financial literacy and the “value of a dollar” are learned via negative experiences. Some of our older informants were able to talk about how toys depicted in advertisements do not always live up to their advertised promises. Levy, 5, explained his frustration with toys that look like they do something in the commercials, but are not nearly as slick in real life. This frustration extended to online games or sites related to TV shows that were not as polished or as easy to navigate as the commercials suggested. Levy understood the advertising was an attempt to get him to buy the toy or game. Still, he rationalized it by saying it is OK to pretend that the toys can do the things the commercials suggest. Rather than viewing his toys, which he often paid for out of his allowance, as a lost cost, he reconciled the expense by finding other ways that the toy can bring enjoyment.

### **Social identity**

Although past research has suggested that children in this young age group are unable to note the social significance of brands or merchandise (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; John, 1999), more

recent research suggests otherwise. For example, McAlister and Cornwell (2010) demonstrated that 3- to 5-year-olds, who were recruited from upper-middle class daycare facilities, were readily able to recognize brands. Further, they showed some evidence of an emerging understanding of brand representation and symbolism. Whereas their research asked the children to sort predetermined brands appearing on cards into different categories, our data revealed several examples of how brand symbolism operated in the children's daily lives. Parents of our informants understood the identity-marking role of brands and consumption, and allowed their children to use brands as markers of identity. Carmen, for example, chose not to limit her son Levy's clothing or avoid licensed characters on his t-shirts. "We don't go out of our way to limit it because it's an expression of who he is and what he likes. He might be 5 but he still has opinions and preferences."

Also, by sitting down in their playrooms and playing with the children and seeing their clothing, their bedspreads, their books, and favorite toys, we were able to see and hear them talk about the meaning behind these brands. Even in households where income was limited, the toys were almost all branded items. For example, Hilary and Rita, sisters who shared a bedroom, were avid fans of Dora-branded toys. Further, in homes where the children were seemingly not exposed to many commercial forces (e.g., being home-schooled and as a result, the primary forms of mass media were vacation bible school videos), the favorite toys were Dora characters. Hilary and Rita's father, John, indicated that Hilary acted out the characters' parts, often taking on the roles of Dora. Certainly, among American parents, the children's room is considered to be the domain of the child (e.g., Omata, 1995) and a place where they can showcase their identity (e.g., Rochberg-Halton, 1984). The identities most commonly viewed were, indeed, derived from commercial culture.

### **Accounting for Multiple, Concurrent Factors**

In addition to gleaning insight into positive, normatively desirable attitudes and orientations that consumer socialization can engender, the data-set also offered invaluable evidence of the multitude of agents and social forces that influence consumer socialization and the way these forces interacted. By visiting informants in their homes and in retail settings, we were able to witness the role that consumer culture plays in their lives and the various social forces—the parents, siblings, neighbors, peers, and extended family—that contributed to consumer socialization.

Ethnographic observations gleaned from retail shopping highlight the multiple consumer influences that children face and the ways parents try to balance them. Our data suggest that, rather than relying solely on their own perspectives and being unable to adopt the position of someone else (as the preoperational stage would argue), young children are capable of more sophisticated reasoning and perspective taking. For example, product preference and the ways that children communicate these tastes represent a point of contention for many parents. Called *pester-power* (Schor, 2004), children are seen as experts at expressing in compelling terms what they would like their parents to buy for them. Studies have shown that these purchase influence attempts are related to media exposure, particularly television advertising and age (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008; Galst & White, 1976; John, 1999), with younger children more likely to engage in pestering techniques than older children who are likely to engage in careful negotiation, mutual discussion, and compromise (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008; John, 1999).

Although we witnessed pester-power as it is conventionally understood, we also saw numerous instances in which preschoolers adopted the more sophisticated negotiation skills associated with older children. For example, Lauren, 4 years old, showed negotiation skills during a food shopping trip when, after her first request for some snack foods was denied, she reframed her request so as to imply that the snack looked interesting and that maybe it would be fun for her and her mother, Helen, to try some. Lauren pitched the idea of buying the snack, one she had never tried previously, as a quasi-adventure, something fun, and new that they could do. Such sophisticated attempts suggest the possibility that preschoolers' negotiation tactics can be more abstract in their influence attempts than the current literature would suggest. It also underscores the ways parents must balance, reject, or accept, these various forces of consumer socialization, and their children's engagement with them.

To highlight these struggles further, the following offers a detailed ideographic account of one parent-child dyad. Relying on a single informant to serve as an exemplar, this section outlines the field notes and reflections that exemplify the complex, multifaceted, and dynamic nature of contemporary socialization by focusing on the numerous, interactive influences that young consumers face in their home and in the marketplace, ranging from parents and siblings to peers and mass media. We turn to preschooler Emma, 3 years old, whose experiences are idiosyncratic to her milieu and experiences, yet illustrate the dynamic and complex nature of socialization found across our informants. Our hope is that by delving deeply into one idiographic case, the details and rich description of this dynamic will become apparent and bring together the issues discussed in the previous sections.

The initial in-home interview occurred in the family room of Amy and Steve's comfortable suburban home. Rapport was established early, as the researcher began the interview by playing "kitchen" with Emma. The interview continued with a detailed discussion with Amy and Steve's approach to raising Emma. In short, they are protective parents who limit Emma's exposure to what they perceive as "inappropriate" stimuli, irrespective of the source. As Amy comments, they struggle with "raising a child in a society where I don't particularly love a lot of the stuff that's being thrown at kids." To combat such influence, the family uses Amy's childhood education degree to build a "child-centered home" and socialize Emma in a developmentally appropriate fashion and reflective of the family's Christian faith. Certainly, such child-centered parenting is reflective of western-style parenting, especially among middle or upper-middle class, where parents focus on the developmental needs of the child and treat her/him as an individual (Hoffman, 2013). As well, although not all our informants were Christian, Amy and Steve are reflective of the estimated 80% of the US population that is (Pew Research Center, 2011). Moreover, it is a guiding principle of their approach to raising their daughter.

Consequently, the couple invests time to research and purchase developmentally appropriate toys online rather than "lower quality" toys at Wal-Mart or Target. Amy shared that she views many toys as "taking imagination away from our kids." As such, Emma owned toys that stimulated her imagination and creativity, such as Groovy Girls, an award-winning line of soft fashion dolls that, according to the manufacturer, promote "personal style, diversity and the power of friendship." The family also limits Emma's media consumption to noncommercial programming on PBS and

preapproved DVD videos, believing commercial content to often be developmentally inappropriate. Similar protective practices emerge in a discussion of the family's preference for shopping at grocery stores such as Trader Joe's that do not carry branded and licensed foodstuffs.

Despite these efforts, Amy and Steve recognize that limiting commercial exposure has become difficult as Emma has grown and spends more time outside of the family home. While Amy may prefer toys such as Groovy Girls, Emma recently developed an obsession with Disney princesses. This perplexed Amy because she has attempted to limit Emma's exposure to princess-themed media. As she elaborates, "We have watched Tangled and Cinderella and that's it. We haven't watched the other—we haven't watched things to know the other characters. So it's like how is this infiltrating our system? I don't really understand it." Yet the infiltration reflects the complex, multifaceted and dynamic nature of Emma's interaction with the numerous socialization agents, especially peers. For example, Emma participates in play dates and attends preschool and church services where she interacts with other children, many of whom Amy acknowledges are quite familiar with Disney princess toys and the related media. These interactions, including Emma's participation in her school's princess club, contributed to Emma's blossoming interests despite limited exposure in the home. As Steve admits, "I think that's where she picked up some of the princess stuff." As a result of the peer interactions and influence, Emma's knowledge of, interest in, and desire for Disney princesses-themed products has been increased. Although this process has created some tensions within the family, it reflects Emma's development of desires for peer approval, a sense of belonging, and to challenge and gain control over adult authority (Corsaro, 2003; Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Laczniak & Carlson, 2012).

Reflective of the reciprocal nature of socialization, Amy and Steve re-evaluated their views on Disney as a result of Emma's interest. The two essentially adopted a new parenting mindset so as to allow Emma to be a part of this emergent peer culture, despite their shared preferences for other types of toys. Although this desire goes unarticulated, they do acknowledge that maintaining complete isolation from princesses "isn't realistic," so they are "picking our battles right now." In short, they have relaxed their standards regarding princesses, but still attempt to limit exposure. They occasionally watch princess films, but seek to mediate their influence by skipping over "inappropriate" sections or emphasizing the positive themes present in the narrative. In this way, they are still exerting their parental authority over Emma's consumer socialization, but in a way that grants her some control as well. For example, Amy mentions enjoying *The Great Fairy Rescue*, an animated film featuring Tinker Bell, because "there is a good message in it. It's something we could talk about between a little girl and a father relationship. So then it was like alright." Other compromises were also made, such as allowing Emma to purchase a princess doll, despite Amy admitting her hang-ups regarding princess-based toys, relating a story about attending a social gathering where Emma brought a princess doll and feeling, "I didn't want people to see she had a princess, honestly. I am not joking. You can laugh at me all you want!"

Subsequent play-based interaction with Emma in her playroom reinforced many emergent insights. For example, she took great pride showing off her princess items, including a recently acquired t-shirt with multiple princesses on it. She excitedly identified all of the princesses on the t-shirt, even those associated with movies she had yet to view. As she states, "No, I can't watch some of them

but I can watch this one (Tiana from Princess and the Frog) and this one (Cinderella).” Emma also excitedly retrieved her Disney-licensed Ariel Barbie doll from the bathroom to share. Amy acknowledged the doll was a “compromise,” but because it was only used in the bath and it did not look like a typical Barbie doll—a toy Amy felt inappropriate for a 3-year-old—she allowed it.

The toy-shopping trip, which occurred months after the initial interview, only further reinforced the complex, multifaceted and dynamic nature of early childhood socialization. Upon arrival at a local Target store, Emma expressed an interest in purchasing “something princess-y and beautiful” with her allotted money. She expertly guided Amy and the researcher to the toy section and spent considerable time exploring the Disney princess section—naming characters, examining their dress, noting how their appearance differed from those in the films. Amy sheepishly admitted Emma's obsession had only grown with time and additional compromises were necessary. The family has watched additional Disney princess-themed films, for instance. After much deliberation, Emma purchased a Sleeping Beauty play set for herself and a princess Barbie for her best friend, Eva, who she commented, “already had a lot of princess toys.” In the subsequent discussion regarding her choices, it became apparent that Emma's friend's interest in princesses was an important factor driving her ultimate consumer decision and larger interest in princesses.

As the above example illustrates, Amy and Steve faced numerous challenges to their attempts to socialize Emma as they desired within a commercial culture. Through her increased interaction with her lived environment—including same-aged peers, the school system, media, and the market place—Emma was exposed to and cultivated a wealth of knowledge about and experience with Disney princesses. And, as such, princesses ultimately became an important component of her daily experiences; she plays with them, wears their images on her clothes, and discusses them constantly. Amy and Steve acknowledge that their compromises have contributed to the pervasiveness of princesses in their lives. But, as they also acknowledge, resistance is futile.

They are neither capable of isolating Emma from this element of consumer culture, nor do they desire to. Their change in perspective has evolved because they recognize Emma's world is now larger than their immediate family and home environment. As parents they desire first and foremost for Emma to be a well-rounded individual with friends, who enjoys life, and, ideally, who also embodies and lives out her parents' values and Christian faith. Conversely, they do not want to limit Emma's interaction with consumer culture in a way that hinders her ability to form friendships, participate in a peer culture, or assert her autonomy. To achieve this end they have slowly and cautiously adapted their socialization strategies to be a bit more lenient and secular so as to better reflect Emma's emerging interests, lived experiences, and friendships—even if that means compromises such as allowing Disney princesses into their household.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings suggest preschool-aged consumers are neither uniformly naïve or limited to preoperational behaviors nor are they solely influenced by media. Instead, the data paint a more complicated and nuanced picture of very young consumers. Our qualitative approach to data collection offers external validity by studying preschool-aged consumers in the real world, in the home, and in the actual act of consumption. In spending time with our informants, we were able

to generate important insights into the pro-social, normatively desirable outcomes that can develop from socialization into consumer culture. Our data also indicate that young consumers today may be different from their counterparts in previous decades. In addition to the influence of television on children, we noted multiple instances of merchandizing, toys, and other mediated experiences today that expose children to branded goods. Even in homes where parents engaged in restrictive media use, children interacted with and requested those products that featured media characters.

Essentially, our informants are “consumers in training” in the active sense at a younger age than previously considered. At the same time, our informants are also “consumers in the here and now,” possessing complex and practical consumer knowledge that they employ in the context of their daily lives. This insight has consequences for existing knowledge regarding socialization processes and outcomes among older children as well because it illustrates a need within the field to reject the notion that members of an age-cohort represent a homogenous social group and embrace children's diversity “in terms of age, abilities, sense of self/agency and knowledge of, and experience with, material and consumer culture” (Martens et al., 2004, p. 157). To achieve this goal, however, we advocate that child consumer socialization research must employ more robust longitudinal, multi-method approaches to research designs and expand the focus of inquiry to include a more holistic view of the complexity and interrelationship of socialization agents across childhood.

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