# Consumer Socialization

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This paper traces the development of interest in consumer socialization. Major policy and conceptual issues are posed, and research in several areas of study is reviewed. Directions for research are specified in three key areas: consumer socialization processes, content of learning, and permanence of early learning.

Historically, market and consumer researchers have not been much interested in the consumer behavior of young people. Children, after all, have relatively little disposable income, and the major problems underlying consumer behavior research have to do with adults—the targets of most promotional activities.

On the other hand, child development and socialization researchers have virtually ignored consumer learning and behavior among children, focusing instead on the acquisition of fundamental orientations relevant to a wide range of behavior, such as sex-role learning, and moral development.

Recently, however, some research attention has been devoted to effects of advertising on children, children's purchase decision-making, their influence on parental purchases, and the cumulative process by which children become socialized to the consumer environment. The primary impetus for these studies has been the charges made by various consumer's groups concerning the effects of marketing activities on children (especially TV advertising), and the subsequent need for empirical data as a basis for effective corporate and public policy formulation. These studies have in turn stimulated other research interests in the consumer behavior of young people. The general interest is in understanding the development of patterns of thinking and behaving which comprise consumer behavior, and this interest in "consumer socialization" is the focus of this paper.

It is a widely held belief in behavioral science that childhood experiences are of paramount importance in shaping patterns of cognition and behavior in later life, and this belief is supported by much research in clinical psychiatry, child development, criminology, and political socialization. Whether or not childhood experiences somehow influence later patterns of consumer behavior is an important hypothesis, for two reasons. First, we may be able to predict some aspects of adult behavior by knowing something about childhood experiences. Second, understanding processes by which children acquire consumption-related skills, knowledge and attitudes is important to public policy formulation, and the development of consumer education programs. Partly as a by-product of the public policy issues surrounding effects of promotion on children, there is renewed interest in consumer education, as a means of preparing young people to evaluate and process marketing information.

There are other reasons for studying the consumer behavior of young people, and the processes by which consumer skills, knowledge and attitudes are developed. One reason is that research in this area may aid in the development of more effective and efficient marketing and information campaigns directed at young people. If one can judge by published materials from marketing practitioners, many marketing efforts aimed at young people are more the results of practitioner's trial and error experiences rather than research (Schiele, 1974). Although some large scale industry sponsored research is currently being done (Gene Reilly Group, Inc., 1973), the lack of a hard, empirical basis for the development of promotional efforts directed at young people is also reflected in the failure of information and persuasion campaigns sponsored by nonprofit organizations and government agencies (Ray, Ward, and Lesser, 1973). Research might help to increase the success-failure ratio among those interested in communicating with young people.

Other important reasons for studying consumer socialization stem from the need to understand family consumer behavior, inter-generational consistency and change, and the impact of social trends on buying patterns of young people and on family consumer behavior. Socialization research focuses on influences affecting children's development, but research on consumer socialization necessarily involves analysis of

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children's influence on intra-family patterns. Moreover, what kinds of consumer behaviors are "transmitted" across generations? Which are modified as a function of contemporaneous social trends and technological developments? And how do early learning experiences facilitate or inhibit these changes in consumption patterns?

A final reason for studying consumer socialization is that research in this area can potentially extend theoretical notions, developed in socialization and child development research. For example, stage theories of cognitive development provide useful explanatory concepts for assessing age-related differences in children's perceptions and understandings of television advertising. Conversely, applications of these stage-theory notions to this aspect of consumer socialization may usefully extend the theory itself.

The central purpose of this paper is to propose conceptual notions for research in the area of "consumer socialization." The term is first defined, and some important conceptual distinctions are made between consumer socialization and more general socialization processes. Three central issues are then discussed, for which data are needed in order to understand consumer socialization processes more adequately, and in order to bring evidence to bear on the areas of interest discussed earlier. The issues are: (1) the processes by which children acquire consumer skills, knowledge and attitudes; (2) the content of these socialization processes, and (3) how early learning influences later cognitions and behavior related to consumption. Research from relevant behavioral science areas is reviewed and assessed in terms of implications for these issues, and, finally, directions for future research in the area of consumer socialization are proposed.

### *Defining Consumer Socialization*

One must understand what is meant by "socialization" before attempting to define the specific subspecies, "consumer socialization."[1] The term is usually broadly defined to refer to processes by which individuals learn to participate effectively in the social environment. Zigler and Child (1969, 474) use the term this way:

> Socialization is a broad term for the whole process by which an individual develops, through transaction with other people, his specific patterns of socially relevant behaviors and experience.

Brim (1966) takes a more circumscribed view, referring specifically to the content of learning:

> [Socialization is] the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of groups and the society.

"Socialization" frequently refers to the learning of social roles and the behavior associated with those roles. Thus, studies have examined the socialization of newly-married couples (Hill and Aldous, 1971), new employees (Moore, 1971), and prison inmates (Wheeler, 1971).

While "socialization" refers to processes affecting present and eventual behavior (e.g., parental influences on a child's achievement motivation and his later striving in the work environment), "anticipatory socialization" refers particularly to implicit, often unconscious learning for roles which will be assumed sometime in the future (Merton and Kitt, 1950; Riley et al., 1969).

Hess and Torney (1967) identify three types of anticipatory socialization. First, children acquire attitudes and values about adult roles which have limited relevance for the child but which form the basis for subsequent learning of specific behavior. Second, anticipatory socialization can refer to information which cannot be applied until later life: a child may have rudimentary understanding of "life insurance," but such information is normally not relevant until adulthood. Third, the concept can refer to general and specific skills which can be practiced in the immediate childhood situation, and which will be "called into play throughout life when appropriate occasions arise" (Hess and Torney, 1967).

"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. Several aspects of this definition deserve some explanation.

First, the focus here is on childhood socialization (although not exclusively), recognizing that not all learning takes place during this period of time, and that the impact of new roles—such as those adopted during adolescence—may greatly alter patterns of earlier learning.

Second, the discussion is limited to marketplace transactions, even though it is recognized that these are only a subspecies of transactions in general. That is, the focus is on consumption-relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes, so the content of learning differentiates interest in consumer socialization from interest in other aspects of socialization.

Third, a distinction is necessary between skills, knowledge and attitudes that are directly relevant to consumption behavior, and skills, knowledge and attitudes that are indirectly relevant to consumption behavior. Directly relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes are those which are necessary for enactment of the consumer role—for example, skills at budgeting, pricing, knowledge of brand attitudes and shopping outlets, and attitudes toward

[1] A complete primer or critical review of the socialization literature is beyond the scope of this paper. For excellent reviews see Zigler and Child, 1969; Goslin, 1971; Clausen, 1968; Hess, 1970; Brim, 1960, 1966, 1968. Specific applications of socialization notions are well-illustrated in the literature on political socialization. The interested reader may wish to see Hess and Torney, 1967; Chaffee, Ward and Tipton, 1970.

products, brands, and sales people. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that all consumer behavior occurs as a function of consumer role enactment. The notion of "role" implies interaction between positions of statuses in society, such as husband-wife, employer-employee. Consumer role enactment may be said to occur during the physical act of purchasing, or consumer role can refer to the set of physical and mental activities specifically involved in purchase decisions—shopping, talking to others about products and brands, and weighing purchase criteria. At such times, skills, knowledge and attitudes directly relevant to the transaction are quite useful.

However, more important for much consumption behavior are indirectly-relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes, which motivate purchases, but are not directly useful in the purchase decision or transaction itself. For example, a college student who purchases a dark suit for a business interview is acting in response to perceived norms and role requirements associated with job interviews. What is important for understanding his purchase is the knowledge and attitudes of the student concerning the interview situation norms, and associated role requirements. Other acts of consumer behavior may be motivated by a desire to acquire some of the trappings needed for successful enactment of particular roles (for example, an adolescent boy's purchase of cigarettes, or a razor).

Similarly, consumer socialization does not only prepare individuals to meet society's "requirements" or "expectations" regarding their behavior as consumers. In fact, society makes very few demands on people in terms of their consumer behavior. There are, however, social expectations that influence the behavior associated with various roles, which, in turn, influence consumer behavior, but in such cases consumer behavior is a second-order consequence of more fundamental aspects of social learning.

## CONCEPTUALIZING CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Conceptualizations of consumer socialization should take into account the content of children's learning about marketplace interaction, the processes by which learning takes place, and the changes in content and learning processes that occur over time.

Moreover, drawing on the distinction made above, it is also necessary to understand the influence of social role enactment on consumption behavior. In the broadest sense, this implies that one needs to understand how children acquire attitudes about the "social significance" of goods, or, more precisely, how people learn to perceive that the acquisition of some kinds of products or brands of goods can be instrumental to successful social role enactment.

### *Learning Processes*

At the basis of much of the criticism of promotional practices directed at children is the implicit assumption that such practices are quite "powerful" in their influence on children (Action for Children's Television, 1971). On the other hand, defenders of such practices argue that parents modify the impact of promotions, and, in any case, much influence is exerted by peer groups (Banks, 1971). These differences of opinion exist at least partly because research has not focused on the relative influences of various socialization agents.

Greater understanding of consumer socialization processes could potentially provide useful input to consumer education programs. For example, what socialization processes occur within low-income subcultures? One could argue from a learning theory point of view that since children from low-income homes have less experience with money, and may be less aware of the range of consumer goods, their learning of some aspects of consumer skills should be less adequate than that of children from upper-income homes, who have more opportunities for consumption. On the other hand, one could argue that children from low-income homes are more likely to become highly skilled consumers, because they have had to learn disciplined uses of scarce resources. Again, data are lacking to support either view, and one would undertake different kinds of consumer education efforts depending on which view accurately characterizes socialization processes among low-income children.

Other questions can be raised about consumer socialization processes. Aside from the issue of the impact of advertising relative to other influences, what processes characterize the development of children's abilities to process information in advertising? Some argue that stage in cognitive development predicts children's abilities to handle advertising; others argue that more subtle effects occur as a function of modeling influences and portray response consequences. At a more general level, are parents purposive and systematic in their attempts to provide consumer training for their offspring, or is learning of consumer behavior more a matter of trial and error, observational learning, or identification with parents by offspring?

Finally, questions may be posed concerning how children develop social attitudes that may have implications for consumption, e.g., social reinforcement explanations for development of dependence behavior (Bandura and Walters, 1963; Walters and Parke, 1964); development of approval motivation (Crowne and Marlow, 1964); and achievement motivation (McClelland, et al., 1953). It would be useful to know to what extent these general social orientations relate to consumption behavior. It seems reasonable to expect that young people who are highly motivated to seek achievements, or approval, may learn to evaluate material goods differently and

differ in consumer behavior in other ways from young people who reflect lower levels of these social motivations.

*Content of Learning*

Any parent can attest that even young children learn some things relevant to consumer behavior, even if such learning merely involves recitation of advertising jingles, or development of brand preferences. But what aspects of learning are important in terms of the issues for consumer socialization research? For example, marketers and government policy-makers share an interest in understanding children's learning as it relates to their skills in evaluating advertising messages. The policy-maker is interested in learning which skills are necessary for children to "cognitively filter" puffery in advertising; the marketer is interested in designing messages which are geared to different levels of children's ability to process information in advertising.

Children's consumer behavior is limited, but what basic skills and knowledge do they acquire? For example, under what circumstances, and by what agents, do children learn skills at matching purchase criteria to product and brand alternatives? How do they learn advantages and disadvantages of shopping at various kinds of retail outlets, and when do they learn resource allocation habits, and understand notions of saving, spending, and investment?

Aside from these aspects of knowledge and behavior relatively directly related to consumption, we would like to know more about the formation of broad social attitudes relevant to consumption behavior, and how children learn that consumption of various products or brands can be a means of self-expression? What factors influence various motivational bases of consumption which are operative in different situations?

*Permanence of Learning and Implications for Future Behavior*

Basic to concern with content and processes of learning, research in consumer socialization must address the issue of what early learning experiences imply for later patterns of cognition and behavior.

There are three inter-related sub-issues:

(a) how "permanent" are various aspects of consumer socialization?
(b) what influences serve to modify previous learning?
(c) what aspects of early consumer socialization have the most direct implications for later behavior?

Obviously, one cannot simply assume that what is learned during childhood somehow "transfers intact" to adult life. Additional learning, extinction of earlier learning, the impact of new roles, all modify early learning. However, it is not evident whether what is learned in childhood is somehow "basic" to later behavior, i.e., whether later behavior is simply an extension and elaboration of more fundamental aspects of learning. For example, a child growing up in a lower class home may acquire certain orientations toward spending. How are these orientations modified later in life, as a consequence, say, of going to college, taking a similar—or different—status spouse, occupying a high-status social position?

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION

Reflecting the fact that concern with consumer socialization is relatively recent, few studies are precisely addressed to the kinds of conceptual issues discussed to this point. It is possible to take a broad view, however, and assess theoretical notions and empirical research in various disciplines and fields of study. The following review of research draws on investigations from various theoretical and research perspectives: child psychology, marketing research, home economics, and communications research.

*Theoretical Perspectives*

The point of view in this paper is that children's consumer behavior is best studied as a developmental phenomenon, and the working definition of "consumer socialization" focuses on children's development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to consumption behavior. The interest is in content, meaning the particular kinds of knowledge skills and attitudes; the processes by which they are acquired; and the modification of learning over time.

Other writers have treated consumer socialization in somewhat similar theoretical perspectives. Sociologists Riesman and Roseborough (1955), for example, speculated that children learn "consumption necessities" from their parents, but "affective consumption" ("styles and moods of consumption") from peers. They observed, in 1955, that there is considerable uniformity throughout American society in the "standard package" of dwelling unit, furniture, appliances, standard brands, and they suggested that variations on this standard package are a function of both the content and processes of early learning and the changing social context. For example, the authors speculated that

> . . . the child who has been somewhat permissively brought up, who has had a hand in family consumer choice, who has earned and spent substantial sums in the teen-age period of ersatz grownup culture, will as a young married person assume as a right many of the items that for his parents were delayed and planned-for luxuries (Riesman and Roseborough, 1955, p. 5).

They stressed notions of "conspicious consumption" —i.e., particular patterns of consumption adopted as a

means of demonstrating upward shifts in social status—although they were not specific about how such consumption norms develop in society or are learned by individuals.

In a similar vein, Parsons et al. (1953, Ch. 3) speculated that children learn basic seemingly "rational" aspects of consumption from parents, but "expressive elements of consumption" from peers and mass media; schools provide training in the "adaptive functions of consumption," meaning the functions of consumption in the context of broader social roles. However, Parsons and his colleagues suggested a contemporary decline in consumer skills; they speculated, in 1953, that young people learn less than in previous years about "integrative purchasing," e.g., allocation of savings to insurance and other investments. This trend was presumably a function of the increasing consumer affluence that characterized the early 1950's.

These early sociological essays provide some useful speculation about the general nature of consumer socialization processes. The failure of these authors or others to undertake empirical research based on these notions may stem from the fact that it is difficult to translate these very general ideas into testable propositions. For example, Reisman, Parsons, and their colleagues seemingly relegate all learning to social processes; however, they are less than explicit about what the consequences of various kinds of social learning processes might be. Moreover, they do not explicitly deal with differences in socialization that may occur as a consequence of cultural, sex, or social class differences, or, in the case of Parsons at least, changes in economic conditions.

From a quite different perspective, marketing academics have posed theories and models of consumer behavior, that focus on an individual consumer's brand choice (Howard and Sheth, 1969), or on comparison or decision processes (Nicosia, 1966; Engel et al., 1968). These models focus on intra-individual processes. More relevant for consumer socialization research are models explicitly accounting for patterns of interpersonal influence in families. Such a model is Sheth's "theory" of family buying decisions, based on a review and synthesis of literature in several fields (Sheth, 1970). In contrast to the earlier model of brand choice behavior (Howard and Sheth, 1969), Sheth posed a series of variables and relationships in an attempt to account for the "total consumption of a family." An extensive review of this model (or the potential of modeling approaches to consumer socialization research) is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the primary utility of the model may be to stimulate research in the area by suggesting some of the variables involved in children's influence on parental buying decisions. As such, the model is relevant to only a portion of interests in consumer socialization; it has nothing to say about the influence of the family environment on children over time. Moreover, researchers using the model for research in family decision-making or consumer socialization must take care in interpreting some of the relationships depicted. For example, "other family members" (i.e., offspring), are posed in the model as equal partners in decisions with parents, and the model provides no basis for determining when this state of affairs may or may not exist. Furthermore, no elaboration is offered concerning the influence of birth order, age, and other factors that may have important consequences for processes depicted in the model.

To summarize, sociologists have discussed consumer socialization, but in the context of general essays, rather than theoretical propositions which could stimulate programmatic research. Moreover, their speculations might not be as appropriate to social and family environments of the 1970's, as they were to those of the 1950's (Roszak, 1969; Kenniston, 1970). Sheth's more recent model is considerably more useful, although it is only indirectly relevant to consumer socialization issues.

### *Learning Processes and the Content of Learning*

Research in consumer socialization requires understanding of two kinds of learning processes: those directly related to acquisition of consumption-related skills, knowledge and attitudes, and processes by which children acquire social motivations having consequences for consumption behavior.

Few studies have directly examined the first kind of learning processes, but one exploratory, qualitative study is suggestive of the range of processes that may be involved in consumer socialization. McNeal (1964) individually interviewed 20 middle-class children in each of three age groups (5, 7, 9 years). The objective of the study was to "explore the attitudes, knowledge and involvement" of children in selected aspects of "the consumer role." "Consumer role" was defined as "all the activities associated with the acquisition of goods and services." As we have indicated, serious conceptual difficulties attend the notion of "consumer role," but McNeal was primarily interested in learning skills specifically associated with consumption, and only secondarily interested in learning social motivations having consequences for consumption behavior.

McNeal speculated that such role learning occurs through "observation, participation and training." Small sample sizes and the qualitative nature of his study presumably precluded more precise specification of the independent and dependent variables. McNeal suggested that much learning among the youngest children about "the shopping process" may occur by observation, since five-year olds could recall shopping trips with parents in great detail. He noted that most nine-year olds shop "independently" (presumably meaning shopping for themselves with discretionary personal funds, rather than shopping as an errand for parents), but he did not comment on the frequency of independent shopping, how

this may relate to other aspects of learning, or what the implications are for later learning and behavior. McNeal found that younger children usually accompany parents on shopping trips, and over half were reported to be permitted occasionally to make purchase selections. The author suggested such activities are an important aspect of early learning through "participation."

McNeal found that older children demonstrated understanding of "marketing and retail functions" but notes that the school these children attended treated such matters in course work. He also suggested that children do not indicate "status motives" as a basis for imaginary purchases (e.g., cars), but he gave no description of how this information was elicited or how the data were interpreted to arrive at this conclusion. Unfortunately, McNeal did not attempt to summarize his qualitative data in terms of implications for the general "consumer role" framework he sought.

While McNeal did not explicitly interpret his findings in terms of the socialization literature, his data could be interpreted in terms of three areas of theory and research: cognitive development, imitation and observational learning, and interpersonal influence.

Many of the age-related differences he suggested can be explained in cognitive developmental terms: for example, his observation concerning children's lack of "status motives" for buying can be attributed to the difficulty young children have in "taking the role of another," which would be required for such status motives to be operative. Similarly, his findings regarding learning by "observation, participation and training" suggest the relevance of theories of interpersonal influence and observational and imitation learning.

*Theories of Cognitive Development*

These theories, typified by the work of Piaget (1928, 1952, 1954), Kohlberg (1971), and others, seek to explain development as a function of qualitative changes (stages) in cognitive organization that occur between infancy and childhood. Stages are defined in terms of the formal systems—primarily cognitive structures—the child is able to use in perceiving and dealing with the environment at different ages. Thus, cognitive developmental theories differ from classic learning theory interpretations of child development in that they focus on the interaction of personal and environmental factors, while learning theories characteristically view behavior as a function of forces applied to the child.

An example is provided by the work of Strauss and his colleagues, who used economic objectives and concepts in a series of experiments to test Piagetian notions of stages and conceptual development (Schuessler and Strauss, 1950; Strauss and Schuessler, 1951; Strauss, 1952; also, Danziger, 1958). The fact that Strauss chose "money concepts" as a stimulus material for studies among 4- to 11-year olds produced the partially unintended result of making an early contribution to our conceptual knowledge of how economic concepts and relationships are learned. Since such concepts are basic to consumer socialization, Strauss' results have important implications for several areas of research interest.

Strauss tested the development of children's understanding with respect to recognition (naming coins by various criteria); comparative value (which money is worth more); and equivalence (making change). In a later exploratory study, he examined children's perceptions and understanding of more complex phenomena: customer-storekeeper relations, relationship of customer payments to store expenses, and conceptual understanding of credit, retail markup, and the role of middlemen.

His data suggest that children's logical and reasoning processes are qualitatively different from those of adults —not simply "less developed," as some early developmental theorists suggested (Jersild, 1947). Rather, progression of conceptual learning appears to occur according to stages, and what is learned at one stage is a necessary condition for progression to the next. Schuessler and Strauss (1950, p. 762) argue that the stages may be conceptualized in Piaget's terms:

> The progression of conceptual learning moved, in each of the three areas (recognition, comparative value, equivalence) . . . from simple responses to complex ones, from concrete to abstract, from discrete to systematic, from undifferentiated to differentiated, from rigid to flexible, from egocentric (absolute) to non-egocentric (relative). (Parentheses mine.)

The authors find that understanding of these economic concepts and relationships increases with age; moreover, they report little difference between sexes, and among children from different social classes, in grasping these rudimentary aspects of learning.[2] Similar results are reported by Danziger in a qualitative study among Australian children (1958). Williams (1970), however, found that knowledge of economic concepts was greater among children from upper socioeconomic family backgrounds than among children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds, at least among children from first through sixth grades.

Other studies have employed developmental notions to explain age-related differences in children's attention to television commercials (Ward, Levinson and Wackman, 1972) and their perceptions, explanations, and evaluations of them (Ward, 1972; Wackman and Ward, 1973; Blatt, Spencer and Ward, 1972; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974).

The general findings are that younger children (i.e., preoperational stage, roughly ages 2-7), exhibit greater stability in attention to television programs and commer-

[2] Detailed analysis of findings is precluded by space considerations. Probably the best summary of this important series of studies is in Strauss, "The Development and Transformation of Monetary Meanings in the Child," *American Sociological Review*, 17 (1952), pp. 275-286.

cials. Older children (i.e., concrete operational stage, roughly 7 or 8-12 or 13), exhibit greater differentiation between programs and commercials, as indexed by attention behavior. When television stimuli vary mainly in perceptual as opposed to auditory complexity, preoperational children exhibit greater differentiation in their attention behavior (Wartella and Ettema, 1974). Similarly, the older the child, the more likely he is to differentiate program and advertising stimuli, to attribute selling motives to advertising, to exhibit multi-dimensional recall of television advertising, and to express skepticism about the validity of advertising claims.

These findings are explained in terms of cognitive developmental notions that characterize differences between children at preoperational and concrete operational developmental stages.

*Interpersonal Influence, Observational and Imitation Learning*

A series of studies have examined the nature and extent of children's influences on parental consumer behavior. Fewer studies have focused on parent's influences on children's developing attitudes, skills and knowledge relevant to consumption, and fewer still have examined relative influences of parents, peers, and mass media on consumer socialization processes. In contrast to studies relating responses to advertising to stages in cognitive development, these studies are normally only suggestive of patterns of intrafamily influence, rather than relatively explicit tests of theoretical propositions.

Consumer socialization processes would seem to proceed more through subtle interpersonal processes than through direct, purposive "consumer training" in families or schools. Ward and Wackman (1973) interviewed over 600 working- and middle-class mothers (and a subsample of fathers) of kindergarten, third and sixth grade children, and found that purposive consumer training by parents occurs infrequently. Parents of older children are somewhat more likely to report purposive teaching, and "setting an example," than parents of younger children. Parents have only general "consumer goals" for their children, most often related to teaching children about price-quality relationships. Few differences were found in teaching modes, frequency of purposive teaching, and consumer goals for children, depending on social class, age of child, and, perhaps surprisingly, sex of child.

If purposive consumer training rarely occurs in families, children may learn certain consumer skills through observation and imitation. The Ward and Wackman data (1973) indicate that mothers and fathers even *expect* their children to learn through observation. Bandura (1971) argues that such learning processes explain how material objects acquire social meaning through mass media advertising:

> As a rule, observed rewards increase, and observed punishments decrease, imitative behavior. This principle is widely applied in advertising appeals. In positive appeals, following the recommended action results in a host of rewarding outcomes. Smoking a certain brand of cigarettes or using a particular hair lotion wins the loving admiration of voluptuous belles, enhances job performance, masculinizes one's self-concept, tranquilizes irritable nerves, invites social recognition and amicable responsiveness from total strangers, and arouses affectionate reactions in spouses. The depicted outcome can be readily tailored to whatever is in vogue at a given time. When the importance of self-actualization was widely proclaimed, television viewers were told that simply by purchasing a certain brand of cigarettes one differentiated himself from the crowd. At the present time advertisements are capitalizing on ecological concerns, implying that purchasing certain products produces any number of ecological benefits.

To date, however, the implications of theories of observational and imitation learning have not been applied explicitly to studies of consumer socialization.

Other studies have examined the nature and extent of children's influence on parental purchases. Berey and Pollay (1968) examined the influence of 8- to 11-year old children on breakfast cereal purchases in middle and upper-middle class families ($n = 48$). Contrary to prediction, they found that highly child-centered mothers tend to purchase their child's requested cereal less frequently than less child-centered mothers. The authors speculate that the result may indicate that mothers with a high degree of concern for their children are more likely to buy what they perceive as "good" cereals, rather than those requested by their children, which may not always be "good." Also contrary to prediction, they found that the child's assertiveness was not related to the mother's brand recall. However, the small sample, and the measures, render these findings inconclusive. In particular, child's "assertiveness" was measured by teacher's ratings, which may not be a valid measure of assertiveness in the family.

Ward and Wackman (1972) studied parental perceptions of the frequency of 5- to 12-year old's purchase influence attempts and parental yielding among middle and upper-middle class families. Data are based on mail questionnaires obtained from mothers ($n = 109$). Contrary to Berey and Pollay's results, the authors found a moderate correlation between children's influence attempts (across more than 20 products) and parental yielding ($r = .35$) regardless of age. In general, influence attempts decline with age, but parental yielding increases with the child's age. This increase in yielding may mean that mothers become increasingly trusting of their children's judgment as their children get older.

Ward and Wackman also found that frequency of influence attempts was related to parent-child conflict, suggesting that purchase-influence attempts may be part

of general patterns of disagreement between parents and children. Moreover, while mothers who placed restrictions on their children's viewing were less likely to yield to influence attempts (r —.24), but viewing restrictions were not related to perceived frequency of purchase influence attempts, suggesting that lesser amounts of television viewing does not necessarily dampen children's purchase influence attempts. Finally, the data indicate that mothers who have favorable attitudes toward advertising are more likely to yield to purchase influence attempts than mothers with less favorable attitudes. This result may suggest that, at least in families in which parental attitudes toward advertising are generally positive, parent-child interaction patterns reinforce mass media inputs to consumer socialization processes.

Wells (1966) suggested that children may influence their parent's purchases by "passive dictation," i.e., where other criteria are lacking or unimportant, a parent may purchase an item on the basis of the perceived wishes of the child. This hypothesis is supported by data from a national study of 6-14-year olds and their mothers (Gene Reilly Group, 1973). It was found that mothers of older children reported knowing their child's "favorite brands" for a variety of products, more than mothers of younger children. Data in this study also confirmed Ward and Wackman's findings that frequency of purchase influence attempts decrease, but mother's buying child's favorite brands increases with age. No major sex or social class differences were found.

Coulson suggested in a pilot study (1966) that housewives are aware of spouses' and children's brand preferences for various products, but that this awareness and "taking preferences into account" (presumably, buying these brands) decreases when brand names are not "visible," and when substantial product changes have occurred. Unfortunately, the data are most difficult to interpret, since brand "visibility" seems to be confounded with salience of brand appeal for various family members (e.g., cigarettes are classified as visible, and canned peas are "less visible").

Perhaps a general weakness of all of these studies of parent-child influence patterns is that they fail to suggest what learning may occur as a consequence of the reinforcement histories they imply. Such consequences are important for understanding consumer socialization.

Extending research by Dickens and Ferguson (1957), Marshall and Magruder (1960) investigated another area of intrafamily influence in an investigation of parental practices affecting children's knowledge and use of money. The author's stated intention was to test the validity of "truisms" and assumptions found in consumer education textbooks.[3] The sample consisted of 512 7, 8, 11, and 12-year-old children in predominantly rural areas of Kentucky. In the course of their analysis, they found positive linear relationships between knowledge of money use and "money experience," with age, IQ, and socio-economic status background.[4]

The findings concerning experience with money extend Strauss' findings, although Marshall and Magruder do not interpret their findings in terms of a developmental framework, and questions may be raised concerning the validity and reliability of their scales. For example, Marshall and Magruder failed to find parent-child overlap on several aspects of consumption attitudes and practices, but the choice of variables and measures may have made parent-child comparisons difficult (e.g., "materialism," "money-centered" attitudes). They did find significant correlations between children's experiences with money and the extent to which parents "spent money wisely." The latter was measured by a "recommended practices scale," consisting of items concerning the extent to which expenditures are planned, the amount of joint decision-making, the practice of keeping financial records, and the frequency of communication with children about money practices. The fact that some of the items in the scale concern interaction with children about money practices may contaminate the observed relationship between wise spending and children's money experience; moreover, there may be considerable differences among social classes which were not identified with regard to the amount and kind of parent-child interaction about money.

To summarize these studies, it seems that consumer socialization proceeds more through subtle social learning processes, rather than through purposive and systematic parental training. Some learning may occur through observation of response consequences to models, as Bandura suggests, and learning no doubt occurs as a function of patterns of intrafamily influence which emerge as children attempt to acquire goods and services for themselves by requesting them of parents. It is not clear, however, just what children learn through these

[3] While a plethora of textbooks and instructional materials purport to deal with "consumer education," few are based on any kind of research (Diamond, 1974). Marshall and Magruder found evidence which contradicted five of nine prescriptions for parental money education practices found in such "consumer education" texts. While this finding may not suggest that all formal consumer education efforts are based on false notions (the findings of Marshall and Magruder may be called into question as well), it may raise questions about the validity of some consumer education materials and practices.

[4] Scale of "knowledge of money use" consisted of number of times child gave correct amount for dime-store items ranging in price from one cent to fifty cents. It is not clear, then, what this scale actually measures. "Money experience" scale consisted of items concerning frequency of specific purchases, number of specific choices of products in last week, if child had independently purchased a gift, and so forth. Again, the rationale or conceptual basis for the scale is not discussed. Procedures for deriving scales, information about scale distributions, or internal consistency of scale items are also not discussed.

various processes, that contributes to their acquisition of skills, knowledge or attitudes important in consumer socialization.

*Relative Influences of Socialization Agents*

Several studies have attempted to assess relative influences of family, peers and mass media on aspects of consumer socialization. A few have used self-reported estimates as a means of measuring family, peer, and media influences on responses to advertising (James, 1971), purchase acts (Teter, 1966) or on drug attitudes and use (Kanter, 1970). The general finding is that parental influence decreases, and peer influence increases, with age, for a variety of purchase acts. Mass media influences are reported to be low and constant. Obviously, however, the adequacy of self-report measures of influence are suspect in terms of validity and reliability.

Ward and Wackman (1971) examined relative influence of parents and media on four aspects of "consumer learning": recall of TV commercial slogans, attitudes toward commercials, materialistic attitudes, and self-reported effects of advertising on specific purchases. They report that learning of slogans is a function of intelligence, rather than of TV exposure time; however, learning cognitive orientations—attitudes toward advertising and materialistic attitudes—is a function of reasons for watching commercials. Particularly important were "social utility" reasons (operationally defined as a motivation to watch commercials as a means of gathering information about life styles and behaviors associated with uses of specific consumer products). They found that younger adolescents talked more with parents about specific consumption practices and acts, but such intra-family communication appeared to mediate between exposure to advertising and purchasing for all adolescents. In a partial replication of this study, Stephens and Moore (1974) and Moore and Stephens (1974) report findings similar to the Ward and Wackman (1971) data, but in contrast to the earlier study only marginal differences were found in parent-child communication about consumption, and this communication was infrequent. This may be due to different family characteristics in their semi-rural sample, in contrast to Ward and Wackman's suburban sample.

Fauman (1966) studied relative influences of parents and peers on brand preferences and brand loyalty among 250 10, 11, and 12th grade boys from predominantly working-class families. Both peer and parental influence on brand preferences were found to decrease with intelligence, but were not related to media exposure time. Peer influence remained constant with age suggesting that this source of influence is established by early adolescence (10th grade). However, parental influence decreased with age. Brand loyalty was found to increase with age, but decrease with intelligence and with increasing media exposure. The results with respect to intelligence are not immediately clear; perhaps intelligence is correlated with decreased respect for others' opinions, or simply with increased knowledge of consumption alternatives, but Fauman did not explore these possibilities. Moreover, the data are based on the subject's reports of father's and friend's product and brand usage. Apparently no reliability checks were made of these data; more importantly, the direction of influence is not clear. If the son is correct that he and his father use the same brand, it may be that the son has influenced his father's brand preferences, rather than vice-versa.

Cateora (1963) analyzed general characteristics of teenage consumption patterns and the relative influences of peers and parents on some of these patterns. Data are based on 189 self-administered questionnaires completed by juniors and seniors in one high school in a "small" city. Cateora finds considerable homogeneity among adolescents concerning various "consumer values and goals,"[5] and that these values were relatively independent of social class. However, inspection of the data reveals several curvilinear relationships between social class and consumer attitudes and practices—upper-lower class students and lower-upper class students often expressed similar attitudes, but these differed from the attitudes of middle class adolescents. Such results may indicate that different experiences may lead to expression of the same attitude. For example, regarding attitudes toward quality vs. quantity in buying apparel, the responses of upper-middle class adolescents who said they preferred to buy one pair of good-quality shoes rather than several pairs of lesser quality shoes may reflect their having been in a position to make this choice, whereas the same attitudes expressed by lower-middle class adolescents may reflect their desire to be able to make this kind of purchase selection.

To summarize these studies of relative influence of socialization influences, it appears that the aspects of consumer socialization examined here reflect the conventional wisdom that parents become less important as children enter adolescence, and peers become more important. However, studies have examined only a few aspects of consumer socialization, and more data are needed before definitive statements can be made about the relative effectiveness of different socialization agents.

*Learning Social Orientations Having Implications for Consumer Behavior*

The position in this paper is that a conceptual distinction must be made between consumer socialization processes of acquisition of attitudes, knowledge and skills relatively directly related to consumption behavior

[5] Aspects of "consumer goals and values" examined included: attitudes toward credit and saving, "shopping patterns" (specifically, attitudes toward comparison shopping), perceived relationships between quality, quantity, and price, and attitudes toward merchants and toward advertising.

(which may or may not have important implications for later behavior) and acquisition of more general attitudes, knowledge and skills relevant to role-enactment, which may have implications for consumption behavior. In the latter case, we must also understand when and why enactment of some social roles involves consumer behavior, and how children come to acquire attitudes about the social significance of material goods.[6]

A child's earliest experience with consumption may consist of learning how he should behave in order to receive material goods as a reward and to avoid having them withheld as punishment. Children also acquire skills in influencing parental purchases of products which they will use but which they do not consider a "reward."[7]

At some point, it would seem that material goods acquire "social meaning"—more accurately, that children begin to see goods as being instrumental in achieving social goals, rather than as simply fulfilling a functional need or as being the consequence of social behavior. That is, a child can obtain a candy bar as a reward for good behavior, or he can ask his mother to buy it simply because he is hungry and wants something sweet, or because he feels it will (temporarily, at least) place him a "cut above" his friends. These motivations are different, are acquired by different processes, and involve quite different kinds of skills, attitudes, and knowledge. Moreover, consumption as "reward" and consumption as "status symbol" are both social in nature; functional consumption is asocial.[8]

How does consumption acquire its "affective embroidery" or "expressive elements," as Reisman and Roseborough put it (1955)? Research suggests that cultural, family, peer group, and mass media influences may all affect such learning. Despite some signs of rejection of traditional values, research continues to indicate that adolescents in American culture are highly achievement oriented. Compared with Danish adolescents, Kandel and Lesser (1972) found American adolescents to be much more concerned with "getting somewhere, establishing oneself, and in this way gaining the respect or recognition of the community. What seems central here is a deep motivating concern for the regard of other . . ." (1972, p. 15). It may be that "regard for others" and "achievement" are sometimes demonstrated through consumption practices.

That children's aspirations for material goods reflect cultural values is demonstrated in a study by Kuhn (1954) who found marked differences between "most desired things" among Amish and other rural children. Social class may also affect children's perceptions of material goods and their implications for role-enactment (Katz, 1964). Certain studies suggest that "materialistic" attitudes are prevalent among blue collar workers, and it seems plausible that such attitudes may influence their children (Chinoy, 1955; Goldthorpe et al., 1969). Other socialization studies suggest kinds of family organization and parental relationships which may have implications for consumer socialization (Miller and Swanson, 1958; Davis et al., 1969; Hill et al., 1970; Davis, 1974; Hill and Aldous, 1971).

Finally, as noted earlier, research on development of dependence behavior (Bandura and Walters, 1963; Walters and Parke, 1964); approval motivation (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964) and achievement motivation (McClelland et al., 1953) is suggestive of social orientations which may have implications for consumer socialization. Research exploring the relationship between these orientations and consumer socialization processes however, is lacking.

### *Permanence of Early Learning*

Socialization is a lifelong process, but most research on socialization focuses on learning during childhood and adolescence. In the behavioral science literature, there are few longitudinal studies to permit detailed analysis of the precise effects of early learning on many later patterns of cognition and behavior. In fact, the lack of extensive longitudinal data forces Brim to observe (1966, p. 21):

> The potency and durability of . . . [early childhood learning] are assumed on the basis of the frequency of learning situations, their primacy in the career of the organism, and the intensity of the rewards and punishments administered. Moreover, what is learned in childhood is difficult to change because much of it was learned under conditions of partial reinforcement.

Longitudinal research is currently being done, however (Bachman, 1969) and recent results of longitudinal investigations have supported the socialization hypothesis, as have earlier findings concerning relationships between childhood learning and adult behavior in such fields as clinical psychiatry and criminology (Short,

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[6] These attitudes would seem to underlie notions of "conspicuous consumption." The conceptual bases of such notions can be traced to Cooley's discussion of the "looking glass self" (1902) and Mead's "generalized other" (1934). The basic idea is that self is defined to some extent by how an individual feels others perceive him. To the extent that such learning occurs in socialization, our argument is that material goods, as well as behaviors, define the "self." More generally, consumer behavior may be considered one of many self-defining behaviors.

[7] Presumably, the phenomenon of material goods as a reward or punishment varies with age. Infants may not understand the significance of material symbols as well as more expressive signs; conversely, except for special circumstances, material objects may lose rewarding properties among older children.

[8] The distinction is similar to that made between "normative" and "informational" influence in group conformity studies (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955) and between "psychosocial" and "problem-solving" influences on responses to persuasive communication (Bauer, 1967). More generally, the distinction is similar to Reisman's "other-directed" and "inner-directed" typology (Reisman, 1950).

1966). In perhaps the best known research, Kagan and Moss (1962), in a 25-year longitudinal study, found consistency of a variety of social behaviors over the period of the study. Similarly, Lefkowitz et al. (1972) having followed children from third to thirteenth grade, concluded that aggressive behavior in early and late adolescence is predictable from aggressive behavior in childhood.

A crucial question for consumer socialization research is the extent to which early learning experiences influence latter patterns of consumer behavior. One might assume that changes in the context of consumption from childhood to adulthood, and changes in the role requirements encountered in various stages of the life cycle, would "wash out" early learning. Two studies are relevant to this issue.

In one of the few longitudinal studies in consumer research, Guest (1955) interviewed a group of subjects regarding brand loyalty 12 years after he had first interviewed them. At the time of the original interviews, the subjects were children in grades 3-12 in the Washington, D.C. area who had indicated "favorite brands" (Guest, 1942). Guest suggests that his data indicate a strong degree of "brand loyalty," since about one-third of the subjects preferred the earlier-named brands even when present use, age at which original data were collected, IQ, and socioeconomic status were controlled. However, since only 20 percent of the original subjects were located and returned the mail re-interview questionnaire, and since brand availability was not controlled, the data are not conclusive. Moreover, it is not clear that a child's "favorite brands" should necessarily be correlated with later brand loyalty.

Another study, by Arndt (1971) examines long-term parental influence on offspring's consumer behavior. Arndt found significant relationships between college freshmen and sophomores and their parents regarding favorite stores, brand loyalty, opinion leadership, and innovativeness. Arndt reported that college students and their parents differ concerning "perceptual variables" (perceived product importance and perceived brand differences), but it is not clear whether this difference is simply a function of the different kinds of items or different patterns of use of the same items, which are purchased by college students and by their parents. He also reported parent-offspring similarity in "behavioral variables" (favorite store type pattern, opinion leadership, innovativeness), but these findings may correlate with other variables, since the students lived at home. Moreover, the small sample size ($n = 55$) does not permit generalizations to the large population of college-aged students who do not live with parents.

It is clear that longitudinal research is needed to address the issues of the extent to which early learning affects later consumer behavior. One extreme view would hold that role changes which occur with age would render early learning meaningless. (Even if this were literally true, studying consumer socialization would be necessary, in order to characterize adequately children's consumer behavior, and the influence of children on purchases by others in the family.) On the other hand, early learning may be an important determinant of later patterns of cognition and behavior. Virtually all behavioral research assumes that people are in some way influenced by earlier learning. The question may not be "how much" early learning experiences influence later consumer patterns, but "what aspects" of consumer socialization are important in influencing various specific patterns of adult consumer behavior.

## DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The research reviewed in this paper is drawn from several different fields, and many different research interests are reflected. Nonetheless, the attempt has been to summarize findings which may be useful to investigators interested in undertaking research on consumer socialization.

The particular priorities for research in the field of consumer socialization depend, in part, on the investigator's particular interests. For example, consumer educators may be interested in knowing the kinds of knowledge and skills that children learn imperfectly, or are not taught in the home or in consumer education courses. Corporate and government officials interested in policy formulation should be more interested in children's abilities to evaluate marketing stimuli adequately, and how these abilities develop.

Certain basic issues go across parochial research interests, however. Our present understanding of consumer socialization processes is based largely on inferences from research in other areas—most notably, socialization and child development research in psychology. Analyses of specific consumer socialization processes indicate that little purposive "consumer training" occurs in the home, so an important need is for research to determine the relevance of these processes described in research in other fields, for understanding consumer socialization.

We would like to know more precisely, for example, just what processes characterize children's acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills relating to consumption behavior, how these vary by factors such as family environment and social class, and how these processes change over time. Longitudinal research would be most useful in addressing these concerns.

Another pressing need is for research to determine how learning of basic social orientations affects consumer socialization. That is, how do children learn about the social significance of goods? Are children differentially motivated to acquire goods on the basis of their "social meaning?" Early sociological essays stressed such notions of "conspicuous consumption." But in light of

contemporary social trends, are these notions still relevant in describing consumer behavior of young people?

The issues for consumer socialization research, and the findings reviewed here, suggest that certain approaches to research in the field may have relatively low payoff. It may be tempting, for example, simply to identify age-related differences in certain gross aspects of children's consumer behavior—how much allowance they receive, how many brand names they can identify, how accurate they are in pricing consumer goods and services, and so forth. The major issues, however, center around consumer socialization as a developmental phenomenon, and it may be most fruitful to focus on the *processes* rather than the *elements* of consumer socialization. For example, it would seem to be more useful to know how children evaluate brands rather than simply how many brands they know. Similarly, it is more important to know how children process information in advertising rather than simply how many advertisements they see in a given time.

Two other issues deserve some research attention. First, much behavioral science literature suggests that socialization processes differ according to social class as well as such factors as sex, intelligence, and birth-order (Hess, 1970). The influence of these social structure factors and related factors regarding the economic climate may have important implications for consumer socialization, but virtually no research has been done in this area. Second, while some studies reviewed here examined children's influences on parental purchasing behavior, the focus was on such influencing behavior as an aspect of children's goal achievement. Some research attention should be given to "reverse socialization," meaning processes by which children may influence their parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to consumption. Such research might also address the impact of various contemporary social trends which are particularly relevant to young people, and the impact of these trends on the consumer behavior of young people, and on second-order effects on parents.

A final issue—and one which would seem to require conceptual thinking more than empirical research—is the problem of specifying dependent variables. The basis of interest in consumer socialization is a desire to influence developing processes of knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to consumption behavior. But what are the goals of such influence? Marketers and government communication campaign planners, for example, are interested in influencing children's specific consumer acts but in a larger sense, the impact of research on consumer socialization research would be magnified if longer-term consequences of consumer socialization processes are specified, and research oriented around these outcomes. One step in this direction is provided by Reuben Hill and his colleagues, in their classic study of resource allocation and consumption goals in three generations of families (Hill et al., 1970). While not explicitly concerned with socialization processes, the study suggests broad dimensions of consumer behavior that may be considered as "outcomes" of consumer socialization processes (e.g., planning, decision process efficiency, planfulness of consumer actions, satisfaction).

In summary, interest in consumer socialization has developed largely due to various contemporary issues relating to corporate and public policy formulation. Research in the field can profitably address these issues, and extend theory and research in other disciplines. It is suggested that consumer socialization be viewed as a lifelong process of acquisition of skills, knowledge and attitudes relating to consumption. The critical research needs center around the processes of socialization, the content of learning, and the modification of early learning over time. Finally, conceptual thinking is needed concerning the dependent variables—the ultimate goals of research in this area. It is suggested that these goals may center around the developing information-processing capabilities of consumers, or around ultimate consumer effectiveness in families.

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