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An Exploratory Investigation of the Dramatic Play of Preschool Children Within a Grocery Store Shopping Context

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ABSTRACT

An Exploratory Investigation of the Dramatic Play of Preschool Children Within a Grocery Store Shopping Context

Purpose –The purpose of this study is to examine the consumer socialization of preschool age children in a peer-to-peer context as they participate in dramatic play in a grocery store setting.

Design/methodology/approach – This research employs a case study approach as outlined by Yin (2002). A preschool located within a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States was selected for investigation. Located within each of the three classrooms was a grocery store learning center. This learning center provided children the opportunity to engage in dramatic play while enacting grocery shopping scripts. A total of 55 children between the ages of three and six years old were observed over a six week period. Observations were recorded via field notes and transcribed into an electronic data file. Emergent themes were compared with theoretical propositions, fleshing out an overall interpretation and description of the case context.

Findings – Findings indicate that even very young children (ages 3-6 years) are able to successfully adopt and utilize adult shopping scripts within the grocery store shopping context. The children followed a common sequence of behaviors that mimicked adult shopping patterns. Furthermore, the children demonstrated peer-to-peer consumer socialization strategies, directing each other on how to perform appropriate shopping scripts.

Research limitations/implications – Because marketers are increasingly targeting children, it is important to understand the consumer socialization that is occurring among young children. Findings from this study provide marketers and other researchers with a better grasp of young children's understanding of the grocery shopping process. Findings also indicate that peers can influence the consumer socialization of young children. This information can be used in the development of appropriate marketing strategies targeting children.

Originality/value – This study differs from previous research in that the data reveal that preschool age children do in fact exhibit peer-to-peer influence while enacting shopping scripts. Although research has examined children as consumers, no researchers have used dramatic play to study young children in a grocery store setting. The rich content obtained from observing children in dramatic play in a grocery store learning center is unique to the marketing literature and provides a better understanding of the consumer socialization of young children.

Keywords – children as consumers, dramatic play, peer-to-peer influence, and shopping scripts

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Introduction

Increasingly, children are serving as a target market in and of themselves (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004; Salinsky, 2006). With the growth in the number of two-working-parent households, children are given more time alone, have growing decision-making power, possess increasing spending power, and are significant influencers in family purchasing and consumption (Grimm, 2004). McNeal (1999) estimates that children spend \$23 billion annually and influence another \$118 billion of adult purchasing. Furthermore, the consumer behavior of children is relevant to many firms in the marketplace because behaviors that are learned at a young age are likely to persist into adulthood (Deriemaeker et al., 2007; Dholakia, 1984).

Research has shown that children exert influence on the household's entire consumption (Lee & Marshall, 1998), but the degree of influence often depends on the type of product, whether the child is an end-consumer, and his/her age (Beatty & Lee, 2002; Palan & Wilkes, 1997). In addition to influencing the purchase of automobiles and electronics, children more frequently influence the family's food purchasing and consumption (Erduran, 1999; Grimm, 2004; Piacentini & Tinson, 2003; Pettersson, Olsson, & Fjellström, 2004). According to a 2003 Food Marketing Institute study, approximately two-thirds of parents include children in their food shopping visits, and nine out of ten parents make purchase decisions specifically because a child likes the item. Hunter (2002) estimates 80% of the family's food purchasing is influenced by children.

Despite the increasing documentation of children serving as a target market and their significant influence on adult purchasing, there is a curious dearth of research examining young children's influence on one another's consumer behavior. The majority of the marketing literature on children that has been published prior to 2000 focuses on individual (i.e., cognitive) factors as they impact children and their behavior (see Roedder John, 1999). Only recently have researchers begun to propose that a wider set of factors can directly impact the development and socialization of children as consumers. Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French (2002), for example, propose that individual (e.g., cognitive), social (e.g., family, friends), environmental (e.g., school), and cultural (e.g., social norms, mass media) factors shape a child's consumer socialization. Similarly, Cowell (2001) argues that parents, schools, peers, and television are the primary factors that impact a child's consumer socialization.

The purpose of this study is to unpack one piece of the childhood consumer socialization puzzle. More specifically, this study examines consumer socialization in a peer-to-peer context among preschool age children as they participate in dramatic play in a grocery store setting. The research questions are as follows: When playing in a grocery store context, independent of adult influence, what shopping scripts do preschool age children follow? When playing in a grocery store context, what influence do preschool children exert on one another? Finally, what are the consumer socialization implications of children and their play in the grocery store context? Next, this paper will review the conceptual foundations of consumer socialization, shopping scripts, and dramatic play. Following the literature review, the paper presents an overview of the qualitative methods used for this study. When compared with previous research on childhood socialization in the field of marketing that is more cognitive and experimental in nature, this study's unobtrusive observational techniques are unique to the literature. Finally, the paper presents key findings along with a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the study.

Conceptual Foundations

Consumer Socialization

Consumer socialization is defined as the “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2). Within the field of marketing, the consumer socialization literature on children focuses on five domains: children’s advertising knowledge, transaction knowledge, decision-making skills and strategies, purchase request and negotiation strategies, and consumption motives and values (Roedder John, 1999). Each of these domains tends to be more cognitive in nature, focusing on the individual.

According to Roedder John (1999), the literature to date has firmly established that the stages of cognitive and social development are particularly relevant to the consumer socialization of children. In other words, the study of children and their consumer behavior should be segmented according to age. Of particular importance to the present study is the perceptual stage, which consists of ages three through seven. The perceptual stage is characterized by a general orientation toward the immediate and readily observable perceptual features of the marketplace. These preschool age children exhibit familiarity with simple concepts in the marketplace, such as brands or retail stores, but rarely understand them beyond a surface level. Roedder John (1999, p. 186) argues that young children in the perceptual stage approach situations with more of an egocentric perspective, accounting for only their own perspective. It is not until the later, more analytical stage (age seven through eleven) where children take more of a dual perspective, accounting for others. Because researchers have begun to propose that a wider set of factors (i.e., social, environmental, and cultural) can impact the development and socialization of children as consumers (Cowell, 2001; Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002), this study takes a different view from the cognitive perspective presented by Roedder John (1999). This study does not presume that preschool children are incapable of taking into account others in the consumer socialization process. In fact, the contribution of this study lies in examining the peer-to-peer influence preschool age children have on one another.

The Role of the Marketer

Research clearly demonstrates that the marketer plays a role in the consumer socialization process (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Grossbart et al., 1991; Moore et al., 2002; Moschis, 1985; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979; Shim, 1996; Singh et al., 2003). Some even argue that the marketer serves an educational role in teaching children about saving, purchasing, and consumption (McNeal, 1999; Preston, 2004). On the other hand, research shows that young children are “vulnerable” and marketers have a heightened responsibility regarding their communication to this demographic group (Robinson, Bloom, & Lurie, 2005; p. 302). For example, several studies have shown that children under the age of five have difficulty in distinguishing television programming from commercial advertising (Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Gorn & Goldberg, 1982).

The ethical issues surrounding the role of the marketer in the consumer socialization of children seem especially relevant in the context of increasing obesity rates among children. Childhood obesity rates among preschoolers have nearly tripled over the past three decades. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2004), obesity rates between 1976 and 2004 increased from 5.0% to 13.9% among American children aged 2-5 years. Several studies have proposed commercial advertising is a contributing factor to the growth in childhood obesity (Francis & Birch, 2006; Gortmaker et al., 1996; Lowry et al., 2002). According to the Institute of Medicine (2005), two-thirds of the \$15 billion spent on advertising and marketing to children and youth in 2004 were dedicated to food, beverage, and restaurant products. Of particular relevance to the present study, Borzekowski and Robinson (2001) found that when children between the ages of two and six were shown a television show with

food advertisements (in contrast to the same show without advertisements), the children demonstrated preference for the advertised foods. However, it could be argued that a variety of factors, such as a decrease in physical activity as well as increasing television consumption, impact children's diets (Livingstone, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

In examining the growing obesity epidemic among children, several researchers have begun to identify possible paths to address the problem. Eames and Orbuch (2006) discuss how school curriculum and programs can be used to effectively educate children about nutrition and diet. Seiders and Berry (2007) proposes that businesses could partner with schools to fund and create such programs. Eagle et al. (2004) argue that an increasing number of schools have nutrition education programs, but increasing awareness may not adequately address the problem. Dietary preferences are either innate or determined at a very young age and thus knowing what constitutes a healthy diet does not necessarily translate into improved consumption. Interestingly, in talking about the relationship between social influence and diet among children, Eagle et al. (2004) argue that most of the literature examines the interaction between parent and child. They state, "An aspect usually neglected in this debate is the influence of peer pressure on children" (p. 53).

Scripts

A critical part of the consumer socialization process is the development and use of scripts, which are viewed as cognitive structures containing information about the nature of various events and activities (Abelson, 1981). In the marketing and consumer behavior literature, scripts are primarily viewed as having a strong sequential structure and content that is shared by most consumers (Stoltman, Tapp, & Lapidus, 1989). The early consumer socialization literature discusses the role of shopping scripts in facilitating children's understanding of shopping knowledge and skills (Roedder John, 1999). However, the literature examining scripts as they pertain to young children is rather limited. Two main studies take precedence in this regard.

In a study conducted by Karsten (1996), children in kindergarten through fourth grade were asked to participate in a shopping game in which they were asked to show the interviewer (who acted as the cashier) how they would buy a given toy with play money in a simulated store. Although the results reveal age differences in terms of understanding the need for change and calculating change amounts, Karsten states that "even the youngest subjects in the study understood that one selected their item, checked their money, decided what to purchase and placed it on the cashier's counter, waited for the cashier to check and record the price and perhaps offer change--they even reminded the interviewer to hand them a pretend receipt" (p. 109).

Shopping scripts further develop as children accumulate more experience and acquire the cognitive abilities needed to transform individual shopping experiences into more abstract and complex scripts. The role of experience and age-related cognitive abilities in script formation is illustrated by John and Whitney (1986) in their study of shopping scripts. After hearing a number of stories about a child exchanging or returning a defective product, children in three separate age groups (four through five years, six through seven years, and nine through ten years) were asked to describe the process in their own words. Compared to the preschool-age children, the older had children more complex, sophisticated scripts. However, research shows that children, preschoolers in particular, communicate more effectively and advance their socio-cognitive abilities when scripts are shared mutually (Short-Meyerson & Abbeduto, 1997).

Overall, research suggests that children in the perceptual stage (i.e., preschool age) of consumer socialization understand the basic shopping script (Roedder John, 1999). However, Berti and Bombi (1988) argue that mere exposure to the shopping process does not automatically result in an understanding of the basic shopping script. In addition, much of the past literature approaches shopping scripts as influenced and shaped by parents or other adults. As a consequence, most

research evaluates the impact that children have on parents' purchasing decisions. Even within the two published studies examining young children discussed above, adult researchers participated in the shopping experience with the children. The present study is interested in the shopping scripts of young children while playing with their peers, independent of adult interaction.

Dramatic Play

Outside the field of marketing, dramatic play is frequently used as a theory that provides rich insight into the intellectual development of children (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, dramatic play permits children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge (Gregory, 2005). Socio-dramatic play is dramatic play with the additional component of social interaction with either a peer or teacher. Studies show that all young children use 'play talk' to rehearse roles and routines (Roskos & Christie, 2001). If given the opportunity, children play out different social, home, and classroom roles and practices as part of their development (Britton, 1970; Dyson, 1993, 2003; Rogers, 2007; Walkerdine, 1981; Whitehead, 2004).

Other studies on socio-dramatic play show that young children develop cognitive and linguistic awareness through experimentation in talk (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitehead, 2004). Dramatic play represents the symbolic thoughts of young children, and thus significantly influences their intellectual development (Piaget, 1962). In fact, role-playing is one of the most significant forms of socio-dramatic play among peer groups (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; Mayesky, 1988; Smilansky, 1968). Thus, research shows a link between play and the development of cognitive and social skills that are prerequisites for learning more complex concepts such as self-regulation, symbol recognition, and social interaction (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Howes, 1987; Singer & Singer, 2006; Ruffman et al., 2002).

This study utilizes theory on dramatic play as a foundation for studying the scripts and peer influence of young children in a grocery store shopping context. Theory on dramatic play suggests that, among young children, peers do influence learning and development (Mayesky, 1988; Rogers, 2007; Sinha, 2005). Some researchers even argue that peer groups are the primary environmental influence on psychological functioning of the young (Harris, 1995). Studies shows that children practice event specific scripts through socio-dramatic play (Dunn, 1990; Girolametto & Weitzman, 2007), and apart from parents, the most important guides to children's language development are their peers (Long, Bell, & Brown, 2004).

These findings stand in stark contrast to previous research in the field of marketing that suggests that peer influence on consumer socialization among younger children is minimal. Outside the field of marketing, researchers show that dramatic play and the related peer influence has a positive effect on the development of children. Thus, this study utilizes socio-dramatic play theory as the foundation for exploring the shopping scripts and peer-to-peer influence of young children in a grocery store shopping context.

Method

Ethical Considerations

During the initial design stage of the study, the authors spent considerable time contemplating the ethical issues related to researching preschool age children, obtaining institutional review of the planned procedures, and garnering parent, teacher, and school administrator approvals for the research. There is a growing literature related to the ethics of researching children under the age of eighteen. The authors reviewed this literature and identified potential ethical issues as they relate to the study at hand. The authors determined that protection of the respondents (i.e., nonmaleficence and beneficence) and respecting the children's autonomy (i.e., autonomy and consent/dissent) were key ethical issues pertaining to this study.

Given that preschool age children are a particularly vulnerable population, the authors sought to protect the respondents as much as possible with the research design. The authors sought to minimize the risk of harm to the children involved in the study, while simultaneously anticipating the benefits to the field of marketing (Jokinen et al., 2002; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Thompson, 1990). Obviously, the children who participated in the study do not directly benefit from the results. However, at the same time, the various potential risks to the children were minimal. For example, there was virtually no physical risk and since the authors chose to only observe the children (i.e., without adult interaction) as they played within the boundaries of existing school curriculum (i.e., the researchers did not ask the children to participate in any activity that was not part of the teacher's existing curriculum), there was little psychological risk. Although arguable, the researchers determined that the children involved in the study were reasonably protected from harm.

Given that young children often lack the full capacities to make judgments (Thompson, 1990), the authors sought to protect the children's rights throughout the research process. While designing the study, the authors obtained various approvals. First, all of the study's details were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of their affiliated university. Second, the authors obtained approval for the study from the school's administrators. Third, the authors garnered approval for the study from the individual classroom teachers. Fourth, the authors sought informed consent from the parents of each child. Specifically, the parents were informed of the study's details and signed a written release for their child to be able to participate in the study (Meaux & Bell, 2001; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

The literature on the ethics of researching children suggests that in addition to obtaining parental proxy as a form of consent, the children should be informed of the study and given a chance to assent or dissent participation (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Mahon et al., 1996; Meaux & Bell, 2001; Thompson, 1990). While most researchers feel that children over seven years of age have the ability to make decisions regarding research participation, some suggest that children as young as four should be asked for assent or at the very least given the right to dissent in order to assure voluntary participation (Everson-Bates, 1988). Consistent with this protocol, on the day before the observations began, the classroom teacher explained the grocery store activity to the children and introduced the "researchers that were going to be watching them in the store as part of a school project." [Together, the authors and teachers determined that this language was developmentally appropriate for the age group (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988).] The researchers then explained to the children that if they felt uncomfortable at any point that they could tell them to "stop watching me" and their data would be excluded from the study. In addition, the researchers were also concerned that the very young age of the children might prevent them from being able to articulate a desire to terminate research participation. Thus, the researchers took extra precaution to watch for "crying, anxious expression, or behavioral withdrawal" among the children and those data would also be excluded from the study (Thompson, 1990, p. 200).

Procedures

The research employed a case study approach. Case studies provide "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 21). The case method is appropriate when the research question is in the form of "why," when the investigator has little control over behavioral events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2002, p. 5). In the field of education, the case study approach is quite common as the classroom is a real-life, bounded social system where the investigator has little control over the context (Waxman, Tharp, & Hilberg, 2004). Furthermore, the case study approach is also appropriate to the study of various marketing phenomenon, such as shopping behavior (Abrams, 2000).

The authors chose a case study design because it provides an appropriate framework for studying a classroom of preschool children: a bounded social system, a real-life context, and the researcher has little control over the environment. Data collection followed the case study approach as outlined by Yin (2002): identifying multiple sources of evidence, creating a database of information, and maintaining a chain of evidence via journaling. The authors utilized two complementary qualitative data collection methods: in-depth interviews and observations. Over a period of two months, the researchers 1) interviewed the teachers of the preschool children who created the grocery store learning center, and 2) observed the children playing in the grocery store. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim; observations were recorded via field notes and immediately transcribed into electronic files.

To begin, the authors obtained permission from a preschool located within a major metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States to observe the grocery unit administered by each of the three classroom teachers. After school administrators consented to the study, each teacher was asked for individual consent and subsequently interviewed about the instructional objectives of the grocery store unit. The interviews were conversational in nature (i.e., unstructured and open-ended) and lasted approximately thirty minutes in length. In order to prevent the teachers' interpretations from biasing the researchers prior to data collection, the content of the interviews focused on the pedagogical nature of the grocery store unit, physical set up of the classroom and grocery store, and information about the various children in the class.

The teachers were very experienced; all had master's degrees in education, each had administered the grocery store unit every year of her employment at the school; and each teacher had been employed by the school for five years, eighteen years, and twenty-six years respectively. In the interviews, the teachers provided a list of students and their demographic information and discussed how age was not necessarily indicative of ability (i.e., some children were developmentally delayed, less social, and less verbal; while others in the class were highly developed and potentially gifted).

Also in the interviews, the teachers explained the set-up and operation of the whole classroom as well as the grocery store "learning center;" and detailed the strategies underlying the grocery store as an instructional tool. Each classroom was designed according to nine "centers." The "centers" represented different activities that the children could freely pursue during certain times of the day. Several of the "centers" were fixed curriculum that stayed in existence throughout the school year. For example, "home living" consisted of a kitchen with baby dolls and a crib. The "quiet center" was a place where upset children could spend alone time to calm themselves. The "reading center" consisted of a large arm chair and small couch with rugs and two shelves full of books. The "math center" consisted of a table with four chairs and a shelf with various games and toys that constituted developmentally appropriate math manipulatives.

During various times of the school year, the teacher would change several of the "centers" to reflect changes in curriculum. The grocery store was a "temporary" center that was part of the curriculum designed to teach the children about "fall harvest." Thus, the grocery store center was one part of a six-week unit (from mid-October through the end of November) in which the children were taught about the season of fall, the Thanksgiving holiday, individual foods, food groups, and dietary habits. This type of curriculum is quite common among schools in the United States (Eagle et al., 2004).

The majority of the data consisted of daily observations of three classes of preschool children playing in the grocery store during the teacher's assigned "center time." Observations were hand recorded via field notes. In order to protect the privacy of the children, all data were recorded using pseudonyms. In addition, some of the details in the findings have been intentionally omitted to protect the rights and maintain the anonymity of the children. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic

information of the students within each class. A total of 55 children between the ages of three and six were observed.

Table 1 Demographics of the Three Classrooms

<u>Classroom</u>	<u>Number of students</u>	<u>Age Range</u>	<u>Gender Dispersion</u>	<u>Minority Status</u>
Classroom 1	18 children	3 years, 9 children 4 years, 9 children	11 boys 7 girls	2 children
Classroom 2	18 children	3 years, 8 children 4 years, 10 children	10 boys 8 girls	4 children
Classroom 3	19 children	4 years, 2 children 5 years, 16 children 6 years, 1 child	9 boys 10 girls	8 children

Figures 1, 2, and 3 are graphical illustrations of the grocery store centers created by each teacher within her classroom. The layout of each individual grocery store was dictated by the physical space of room as well as available structures (i.e., shelving, tables, storage bins, and cupboards). The teachers had purchased and provided the grocery store contents including products (i.e., boxes of cereal, tubs of butter), carts, bags, boxes, and cash register(s). The products within each grocery store setting were representative of consumer packaged goods that would be found in a typical supermarket. For instance, instead of stocking the shelves with pretend food toys, the teachers stocked the shelves with real products and empty packages of real products, thereby adding to the authenticity of the grocery store centers. Due to the perishable nature of fresh produce, the teachers provided high-quality artificial fruits and vegetables to realistically represent such foods.

Figure 1 Classroom 1: Grocery Store Center

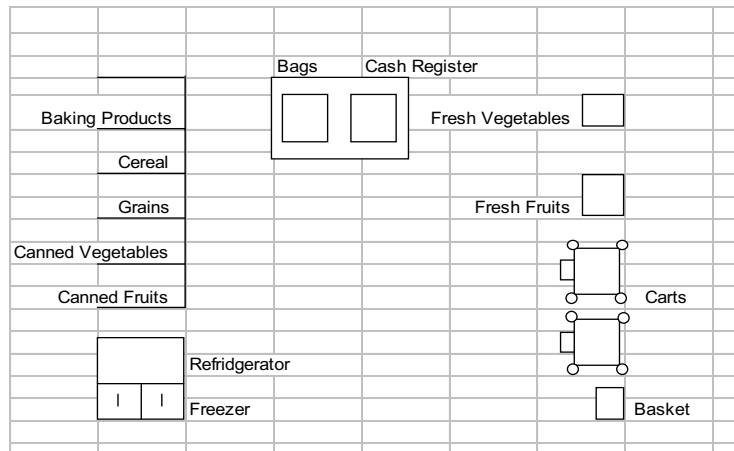


Figure 2 Classroom 2: Grocery Store Center

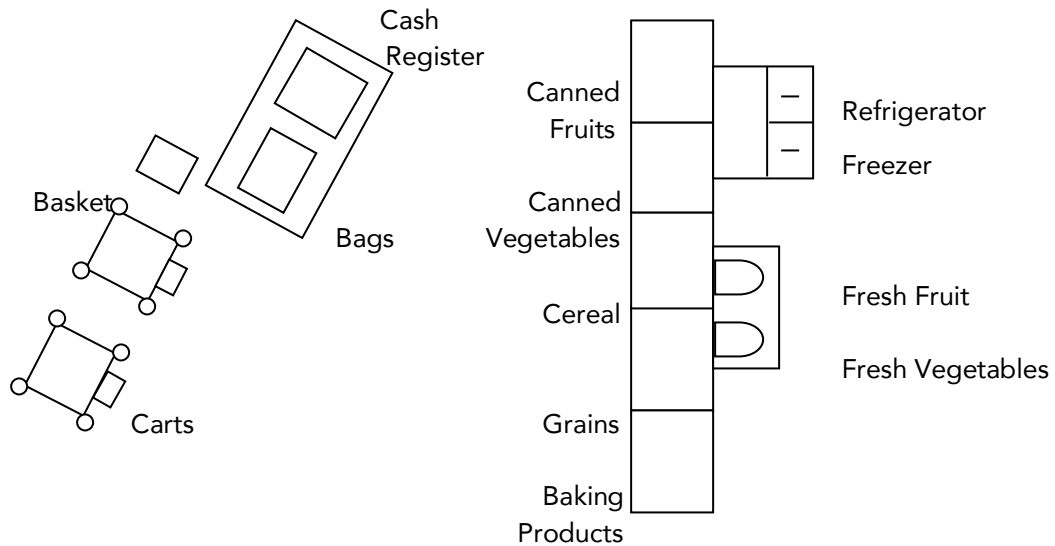
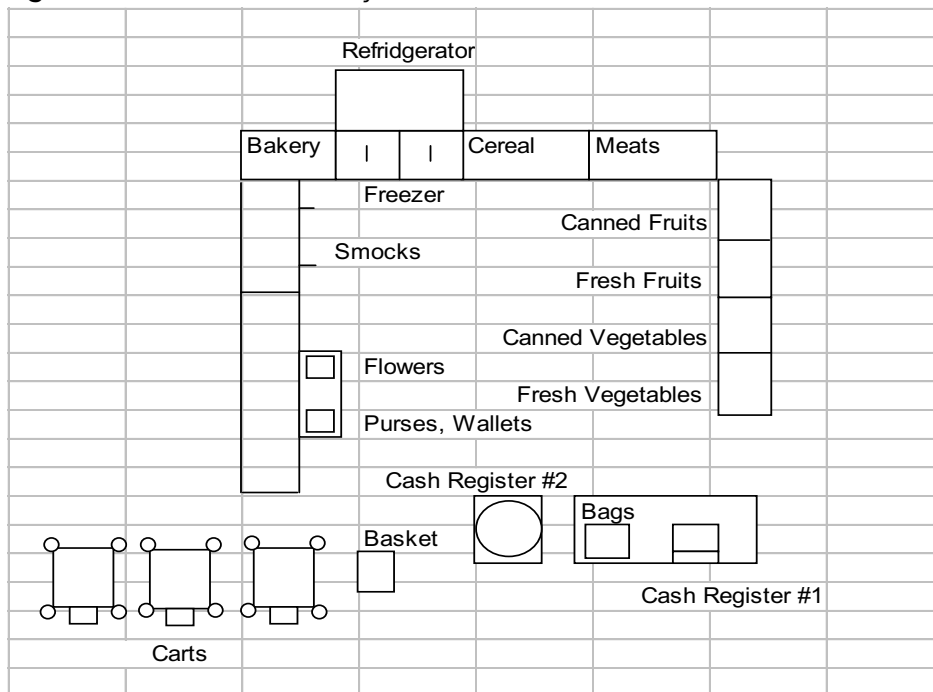


Figure 3 Classroom 3: Grocery Store Center



The researchers visited the school each day to observe “center time” within one of the three classrooms. Furthermore, the researchers rotated among the three classrooms so that each was visited equally. Accounting for vacation days, special events, and other school activities that interrupted the regularly scheduled “center time,” the researchers conducted a total of twenty-one observational sessions (over a six week period) that lasted from sixty to one-hundred and twenty minutes in length.

Patton (2002) states that during observations the researcher “has the opportunity to see things that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting” (p. 262). In the spirit of Patton (2002), during the observational sessions the researchers systematically recorded the statements and behaviors of the children who were playing within the grocery store. The researchers acted as silent observers sitting approximately three feet outside the perimeter of the grocery store, avoiding interaction with the children who were at play (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The hand-recorded field notes were transcribed into electronic transcripts. Following a process common to the case research method (Trochim, 1989; Yin, 2002), data analysis and interpretation took four steps. First, the authors identified the theoretical propositions via previous research and an initial review of the transcripts. Next, the authors aggregated the data, using the constant comparative method to interpret common patterns and identify themes. In the third step, the authors conducted direct interpretation by returning to each individual observational session to determine relevant meanings in light of the common patterns and themes. Finally, the authors compared the emergent themes with the theoretical propositions, fleshing out an overall interpretation and thick description of the case context. Throughout the process, the third author reviewed and critiqued the analysis and interpretation to provide insight into the process. For reliability and validity one of the classroom teachers reviewed a copy of the findings to verify the analysis and interpretation.

Findings

On a holistic level this study’s findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that children in the perceptual stage (i.e., preschool age, three through seven) understand the basic shopping script (Roedder John, 1999). However, this study differs from previous research in that the data reveal that preschool age children do in fact exhibit peer-to-peer influence while enacting shopping scripts. Thus, the findings support the proposition that social (i.e., peers) and environmental (i.e., school) factors do in fact influence a child’s consumer socialization, even at a very young age.

Shopping Scripts

The data reveal that the preschool children observed in this study successfully utilized shopping scripts during their dramatic play in the grocery store context. The children followed a common sequence of behaviors that mimicked adult shopping patterns within real-life grocery stores. For example, the field notes repeatedly indicated the ability of the preschool children to enact adult roles and processes in this context.

When the timer rang, the kids jumped up from the other centers located around the room. Everyone wanted to go into the grocery store. As the children swarmed the teacher, she picked the six who would be allowed in for the next block of time. Each of the six was given a necklace. The child looked at the necklace and assumed his/her post. Ila (age 4) was given the necklace that said “cashier” and had a picture of a cash register on it. She was very excited as she put on her necklace and proceeded to the check-out counter. She stood behind the cash register and waited patiently for customers. Elaine (age 4) was given a necklace that said “shopper” and had a picture of shopping cart on it. She put on her necklace and headed straight for the shopping carts to the left side of the store. She grabbed the first cart in her reach and looked around as if she was trying to decide where to start her shopping trip. She realized that the starting point was the freezer/refrigerator section on the far right of the store. So she quickly pushed her cart around there and started shopping. After getting ice cream and blueberries out of the freezer, Elaine selected butter and sour cream from the refrigerator. She

then pushed her cart toward the bins of fresh fruit and vegetables. She looked over the fresh items and selected an apple and banana. She was now at the end of the aisle and so she quickly turned the corner started down the next aisle. She stopped at the first bin (baking products) and chose a bottle of cinnamon and a tub of frosting. She proceeded down the rest of the aisle, bin by bin, choosing: three boxes of cereal, a can of vegetables (appears to be green beans), and two cans of fruits (peaches and fruit cocktail). Elaine was at the end of the second aisle and had a full cart. In fact, the products are mounded on top of one another within the cart. She turned to her left to get in the line forming in front of the cash register (Classroom 2, November 8, 11am; Ila = age 4, Elaine = age 4).

All of the children seemed to follow a similar pattern of play within the grocery store. Like adult shopping patterns, the children who were assigned to the shopper role entered the store, obtained a shopping cart or basket, turned to the right or left to locate the starting point (which differed for each classroom; see Figures 1, 2, and 3), and then proceeded down the aisles as they pushed their carts along and selected merchandise. After they passed through the aisles, the children rolled their full carts toward the cash register and stood in a check-out line. The cashier scanned, weighed, and rang up items and then asked for payment. After the shopper indicated that he/she had paid (e.g., slapping the hand and asking for change), the bagger put the items in grocery bags and the shopper carried the bags to the "home living" center.

With respect to how they browsed the products and selected from the merchandise, the preschool children displayed shopping styles similar to many adults. The children followed the flow of each store as they shopped. They would watch the shelves as they passed by the products. Throughout the process, the children would stop, pick-up, and examine certain products. Sometimes they would put the product back on the shelf after examination; more often the item was subsequently placed into the cart. Thus, it appeared that the majority of the children were deliberate in their food selections.

Food Choice. An examination of what foods were selected more frequently revealed that the children intentionally chose products that fit their taste preferences. For example, children selected ice cream, frosting and cereal more frequently, when compared to fresh fruits and vegetables. Among the fresh fruit and vegetable selections, children tended to prefer fruit (over vegetables) and lean toward well-known fruits such as bananas or apples as opposed to kiwi or pineapple.

Diane (age 5) seems to be putting some thought into her selection. After getting a cart, a purse, and a wallet, she drives her cart around the two cash registers to start at the entrance of the store. She begins shopping in the fresh vegetables. She looks over the products carefully, picking up a head of cabbage, examining it and putting it back in the bin. It seems that she has decided not to purchase it. She scans the canned vegetables and decides to move onto the fresh fruits. She picks up a banana, examines it but this time places it in her cart. She does the same for an apple and strawberry. She moves onto canned fruits and does the same. She picks up three cans of fruit, looks them over, and places them in the cart. She turns her cart toward the next aisle and again visually scans the items in each section. Some she picks up and puts back on the shelf while others she places in the cart. After sweeping through all the aisles in the store, Diane's cart is full. It includes: a box of oatmeal; a container of cool whip; three cans of fruit; a fresh apple and strawberry; a box of crackers; and a package of ricotta cheese (Classroom 3, November 30, 2pm; Diane = age 5).

I [the researcher's perspective] have noticed a similar pattern across the three classes of children. Vegetables are not the preferred food. It seems that most avoid items that are not "kid friendly" or particularly "nutritious." The children seem to select items such as ice cream, cool whip and frosting more frequently. Fruit also seems popular, while meat and vegetables are rarely put into their carts (Classroom 3, November 30, 2pm).

The avoidance of healthy foods, such as vegetables, could likely be due to lack of familiarity. For instance, Ashia (age 3; classroom 1) asked the teacher to identify unknown grocery store items including an apple, kiwi, cabbage, and cinnamon. However, many of the children (especially those that were older) identified products by themselves, as they shopped. For example, Elaine (age 4; classroom 2) identified each product as she shopped, announcing "waffles" as she picked up a box of waffles and "cereal" as she placed cereal in her cart. This shows that the children were not just filling their carts robotically. Furthermore, many of the children publicized that they were shopping according to their taste preferences or favorite foods.

Veronica (age 4) grabs a cart and fills it with ice cream, a pineapple, a pack of blueberries, a box of cake mix, peaches, and a kiwi. She approaches the checkout counter, where the cashier and bagger are waiting. Her cart is overflowing. She turns to the cashier and says, "I picked these because I like it." After checking out and putting the groceries away in the "home living" center, Veronica shops again. This time she fills her cart with canned goods (both fruit and vegetables), chips, spaghetti, and crackers. As she places the chips in the cart, she excitedly proclaims, "Chipies! Chipies!" (Classroom 2, November 16, 11am; Veronica = age 4).

While children may have selected items based on their taste preferences or eating habits, it is also possible that children made food choices that they typically would not make at home, where parents often regulate consumption. It seemed that peer influence indirectly affected food selection. For example, when Carson (age 3; cashier; classroom 1) held up a box of Coco Puffs and asked Lance (age 4; shopper; classroom 1) if he liked the cereal, Lance said, "Yes. My friend eats them." Lance was apparently purchasing the cereal, not only for his own satisfaction but also based on his friend's preference. Although the children in this study were not interviewed directly, interactions with the teachers during observation offer some insight into their food preferences.

The children sat on the floor and the teacher explained that the centers that would be open for the next hour and a half. As the teacher pulled each student's name from a box, she asked the student what they liked to buy at the grocery store when they went shopping with their parents. Many of the students responded with healthy foods, such as peanuts, watermelon, apples, and cheese. Other responses included donuts and frosting. Lisa (age 4) told the teacher that she liked "marshmallow cereal."

Lisa goes to play in the "home living center." She is preparing meals in pots and pans on the stove and announces, "I need to buy some food." She goes into the grocery store center as if she is on a mission (i.e., focused and very busy). Upon checkout, she places a box of Lucky Charms on the counter and tells the cashier, "I'm getting marshmallow cereal." This is the same product that she mentioned earlier to the teacher (Classroom 2, November 15, 11am; Lisa = age 4).

Although the children's responses to the teacher's inquiry indicated that they typically buy healthy or nutritious foods when shopping with their parents, their food choices in the grocery store lean toward less nutritious or unhealthy foods. Furthermore, Lisa's shopping behavior shows the deliberate nature with which some children chose their products in the grocery store setting.

Shopping Process. The shopping cart consistently served as the starting point for the process. No child shopped without a cart or basket. In addition, the cart was preferred to the basket when they were both available to the shopper. When shopping, many children often filled the baby seat portion of their grocery carts first and then filled the larger basket part of their carts. Nearly all of the shoppers filled their carts full before proceeding to check-out. The vast majority of the time, the shopper had an overflowing cart where it was so full that items were falling on the floor as he/she got into the line in front of the cash register. The field notes also illustrated this form of play.

Doug (age 4) has a full cart. It is overflowing and he cannot physically add another item to the heap. Items are literally falling off the mound as he heads toward the cash register. (This is common to most of the shoppers. They proceed to checkout with a full cart and for many the cart is literally overflowing.) Doug unloads all of the items in his cart on the conveyor belt that is connected to the cash register. The cashier, Jason (age 4), starts to scan the items and then places them one at a time on the counter to the right of the register. Adam (age 3) is the bagger but he is smiling and looking around...not really concentrating on his job. He starts to put the items in the bag one at a time. Because things aren't moving quickly, Doug takes his cart and starts refilling it again. Once it is full, he takes it back to the cash register. By now Adam has bagged Doug's groceries. Adam says, "Here you go." Doug says "Thanks." He takes the bag of food from Adam, and leaves his full cart near the register while he delivers his food to the "home living" center. When he returns, he grabs his cart and takes it to the back of the check-out line (Classroom 1, December 4, 10:30am; Doug = age 4, Jason = age 4, Adam = age 3).

Communication. During the shopping process the children rarely spoke to one another. If one child tried to influence the selections of another, it was not well received. In addition, the children who waited in the check-out line were unusually quiet. Compared to a typical classroom setting where the teacher has to ask students waiting in a line to be quiet, the shoppers appeared to exhibit an understanding of check-out line etiquette. While waiting in the checkout line, the shoppers were quiet, still, and patient. Sometimes, while waiting, the shoppers looked over items near the cash register and grabbed what appeared to be last minute "impulse" buys.

In contrast to their quiet stature while waiting in the check-out line, the shoppers often communicated in great detail with the cashier. As detailed below, peer interaction and influence appeared to revolve around the cashier. Shopper conversations with the cashier spanned a variety of topics, including: the purpose of the shopping trip (see quotes below), the financial aspects of the exchange (e.g., cost, payment, and change; detailed later), and sales promotion techniques (e.g., Everett (a three year old shopper) says to Collin (a four year old cashier), "Is this orange juice on sale?"). For example, some of the children felt compelled to share their purpose for grocery shopping, without being prompted by the cashier, as if offering justification for their purchases. The following quotes were drawn from the field notes.

I am shopping for a party tonight. – Karen, the shopper, says to the cashier (Classroom 3, November 27, 2pm; age 4).

This is for my baby. – Alice holds a banana in the air before handing it to the cashier (Classroom 2, November 3, 10am; age 3).

I am getting a banana for lunch. – Lisa says to the cashier as the item is being scanned (Classroom 2, November 7, 2pm; age 4).

Upon checkout, the children consistently transported their groceries to the nearby home living center. This mere act of transferring pretend groceries from one center to the other shows that the students understood the shopping experience does not end once the groceries are bagged and bought. As shoppers, they are expected to take their groceries home with them. In some cases, the shopper took groceries to the “home living center,” where another student would proceed to unpack the items and place them on shelves in the refrigerator, freezer and cabinets located within the “home living center.” Although less frequent, the researchers even observed the occasional shopper pretend to “drive” the groceries to the “home living center.”

Role Performance. It appeared that the role of cashier was the most coveted position in the grocery store with the shopper role being second in preference. The researchers regularly observed either children running toward the cash register when another child abandoned post or two children arguing over who was going to get to be the next cashier. When a child was denied the opportunity to be the cashier, he/she often assumed the role of the shopper. The following field notes illustrate the preferences that were observed among the children.

Axel (age 3) and John (age 3) both race toward the open cash register. Axel gets there first and pulls the cash register across the counter in order to position it squarely in front of himself. John is clearly disappointed and emphatically says to Axel, “Hey, I wanted to do that!” Axel shakes his head “no” and hangs on tight to the register. John looks around. He turns and dashes toward an open grocery cart. He grabs it and pushes it around to the freezer to start shopping (Classroom 2, November 13, 10am; Axel = age 3, John = age 3).

Although not the most preferred job, the role of bagger was not necessarily disliked by the children. The bagger often took orders from the cashier, working closely with that person. Most of the students, when in the role of cashier, appeared to try and recruit a bagger if the post was empty. For example, when the bagger position was not filled and a new cashier took over, he/she often yelled at other students in the class who were playing at other centers to “come be the bagger with me.” To the researchers, it appeared that the cashier enjoyed working with and talking to the bagger. Thus, the recruitment behavior seemed to be socially motivated although it is possible that the cashier recognized that the work went faster and was easier when he/she had a bagger standing by his/her side. Children playing the role of bagger loaded items in the bags and handed the bags to the shopper, often displaying congenial friendly service. For example, four year-old, Katherine said, “Ma’am, here’s your bag. Have a nice day,” as she handed the groceries to the shopper (Classroom 1, December 4, 10:30).

In contrast to the other roles, the stocker seemed to be the least preferred job. It appeared that the children often avoided being the stocker. For example, when children were assigned the role by the teacher, they often opted to leave the grocery store center prior to completing their duties. On one occasion, when the shelves were completely empty of products, the teacher in classroom 2 came into the grocery store and asked the cashier, “Who is the stocker?” The cashier pointed and said, “Richard.” Richard (age 3) was standing near Collin’s (age 4) shopping cart. The teacher asked him, “Why are you not doing your job? We need products on the shelves of this grocery store.” He said, “I

don't want to put up the toys!" and left the grocery store, heading for the science center. Across the classrooms, the researchers observed a regular occurrence of empty shelves, where the child acting as cashier (or the teacher) had to ask all of the others in the grocery store to temporarily stop shopping and collectively help restock the shelves.

Peer Influence

The role of the cashier was the most preferred job in the grocery store for a variety of reasons. The cashier was often seen as the person in charge, directing others on how to handle their tasks and taking an active role in running the whole grocery store. The cashier made sure the line of shoppers moved efficiently, instructed the bagger how to perform his/her job, encouraged others to be the stocker, and directed customers to pay at the right time in the right way. The cashier appeared to be the most social job, as the majority of peer-to-peer interaction and influence revolved around the cashier. Because of the responsibility associated with the position, the cashier took his/her job quite seriously. Most of the cashiers displayed a mechanized set of movements during the checkout process, while simultaneously directing others on how to properly perform their roles. Below is an example from the field notes.

Veronica (age 4), working as the cashier, follows the same systematic movements as the previous cashier, her classmate Ila (age 4). With each item, she follows the exact same set of movements to complete the checkout: 1) take the item from conveyor belt; 2) run the item across the scanner; 2) weigh the item on the scale; 3) punch a button on the register; and 4) set the item to the right of the cash register. Veronica turns toward her bagger, John (age 3), and tells him to "hold the products until Lisa (age 4; the shopper) is all checked out." (Veronica is a four year-old girl; she has lots of personality and talks a lot. John is a three year-old boy who is much quieter in nature.) John is fumbling around with the bag, trying to open it up at the top. Veronica stops scanning and takes the bag out of his hands. She shows him how to place items in the bag one at a time and says, "Why can't you do it by yourself? You should try it" (Classroom 2, November 3, 10am; Veronica = age 4, Ila = age 4, John = age 3, Lisa = age 4).

Previous research indicates that older children with more substantial cognitive abilities have an advantage in translating shopping scripts into the dramatic play setting. Younger children need more external prompts and retrieval cues to access whatever script knowledge they possess (Roedder John, 1999). Yet, the data shows that older children can provide such prompts and cues and, in turn, influence the younger children while enacting the shopping scripts together. Hence, dramatic play offers a setting in which children of various ages can assist one another to incorporate appropriate shopping scripts and therefore learn appropriate consumer behaviors. The data in fact revealed a consistent pattern that when an older, more developed child was the cashier, he/she instructed his/her peers on how to perform the correct shopping script. For example, the field notes documented a case in which two girls were playing together, one as the bagger and the other as the cashier. The bagger, who was a mature four year-old about to turn five, gave her younger classmate directions on how to enact the proper shopping script.

John (age 3) is tired of being the bagger and walks away from his post. As he exits the grocery store, Elaine (age 4) runs toward him and asks for his bagger necklace. Veronica (age 4) is still the cashier. Elaine becomes the bagger and Veronica says "Hi" and smiles at her. They both giggle. Veronica gets back to work. She continues her check-out process for each item: scan, weigh, punch button, set to right of register. After weighing an apple, she does the same for cereal and Jell-O. Elaine is watching and says, "You only need to weigh the fruit and

vegetables, not the other stuff.” Veronica continues with her process picking up canned peas. Elaine repeats, “You should only weigh the fruit and vegetables.” Veronica then weighs the can of peas and says, “This is a vegetable [points to the picture on the can] so I can weigh it” (Classroom 2, November 3, 10am; John = age 3, Elaine = age 4, Veronica = age 4).

In this case, Elaine (the bagger) was trying to talk with Veronica (the cashier) about what is appropriate to put on the scale in the check-out process. (Elaine is an advanced four year old who will turn five in two weeks, while Veronica has recently turned four.) This is a prime example of peer-to-peer influence in the dramatic play process, but the pattern of bagger-to-shopper influence was more often reversed. In most cases, the cashier directed the behavior of the bagger, shopper, or stocker. For example:

The bagger changed to John, who is three years-old. Collin, a second year student who is four years-old and much more mature (i.e., taller, better language skills), sees that John isn’t paying attention. As the items start to build up on the counter, Collin stops scanning for a second and tells John to “get a bag out of the box.” Then he says, “Open it and put these foods in there.” John grabs a bag and opens it from the handles. He put in two items. Collin appeared to be continually watching John out of the corner of his eye and reminding him to stay on task (Classroom 2, November 6, 10am; John = age 3, Collin = age 4).

Monetary Exchange. Much of the peer-to-peer interaction between students within the grocery store was not focused on the products but rather the money necessary to buy the products. While children tend to grow up learning about cash through the form of allowances or games like Monopoly, the young children in this study had a remarkable understanding of the credit card transaction process. The children in classroom three (ages 4 through 6) were given coins, bills, and credit cards to use in the shopping process. This was not the case in classrooms one and two (ages 3 and 4), but those younger children pretended to pay in a similar manner despite not having physical money or cards to exchange. In classroom three, the researchers observed adult-like usage of the money and credit cards. Children frequently counted the money before putting it in their purse, wallet, or the cash register. In addition, sometimes shoppers asked their classmates for a specific type of credit card. For example, Barbie asked Heather (two five year-olds), “Do you have Discover?” In all three classrooms (whether there was physical money available or not), the cashier was mainly focused on the money needed to complete the transaction, calling out prices of items as they scanned and prompting the customers to make payments.

Deborah (age 5; the shopper) starts to walk away from the checkout line after all of her items have been scanned by the cashier. She turns back toward the cashier (Harold; age 5) and says, “Oh, I forgot to pay.” He responds authoritatively, “That will be \$4,454.00.” She says, “Just put it on my credit card and hands him a card that she has taken out of her purse.” Harold says, “Of course, I am going to need to swipe this card.” He drags it across the front of the cash register. As he hands the card back to her, he says, “Thank you. Have a good day” (Classroom 3, December 5, 2pm; Deborah = age 5, Harold = age 5).

In classrooms one and two (with younger children, ages 3 and 4), the teacher did not provide the students with physical money (e.g., coins, bills, credit cards) to use in the grocery store. Despite this limitation, the children exhibited a comprehensive understanding of the monetary transaction process as well as those in classroom three (i.e., the older children, ages 4 through 6, who were provided money and credit cards). Through a series of tapping hands, the young children understood that money was being exchanged through dramatic play. The researchers regularly observed hand-to-hand contact that

represented payment from the shopper to the cashier and a subsequent process symbolizing the cashier making change in return to the shopper.

Ned (age 3; the cashier) takes each of Candice's (age 4; the shopper) items from the conveyor belt one at a time. He scans, weighs, and punches the keys. Next, he sets the item down in front of the bagger to his right. After completing this process for each of Candice's items, Ned says, "Is that all your groceries?" She shakes her head indicating "Yes," and starts to walk away. He realizes that she hasn't paid and says, "Candice, you cannot go. You haven't given me monies and I need to give you your changes." She runs back and tags his out-stretched hand. He then tags her hand back and says, "Here is your \$20" (Classroom 2, November 10, 10am; Ned = age 3, Candice = age 4).

Parental Influence. Just as students' actions observed in this study were directly influenced by one another in a context when there was little to no adult interaction, another interesting phenomenon was the indirect influence of the adult parents, as portrayed through peer-to-peer dialogue. Through conversation, students influenced each other's shopping behavior based on lessons that they learned individually from their respective parents.

Carson (age 3; the bagger) is trying to put too many of Doug's (age 4; the shopper) groceries into one bag. The bag is so full that items keep falling onto the floor. The cashier, Jason (age 4), says, "Get another bag." Carson replies, "My Mom usually has fifteen bags when she goes grocery shopping" (Classroom 1, November 28, 10:30am; Carson = age 3, Doug = age 4, Jason = age 4).

The researchers observed that the buyer behaviors that the children learned through shopping with adults in the real world were infused throughout the dramatic play in the grocery store center, respectively influencing their peers. In one case, a student shopper was confronted with a decision making situation as she realized that her parent's influence differed from her peer's influence.

Rita (age 5) becomes a shopper. She enters the store and proceeds to the left hand side where the purses and wallets are laying on the table. She picks up a wallet, opens and closes it. She turns to walk toward the checkout counter. She asks the cashier if he will give her some money before she starts shopping. The cashier, Wallace (age 6), tells Rita, "You can't use a wallet. You have to use a purse because girls only use purses and boys use wallets." Rita responds, "My mom uses a wallet. So can I." Wallace begins to make fun of Rita for not using a purse and refuses to give her any money. Rita leaves the cashier station and goes back to the table that has the purses. She picks up the different purses, opens each one, looking inside. It appears as if she is debating whether to use a purse. She selects the rainbow purse and then puts her wallet inside. She puts the purse on her shoulder and heads to her left to grab a shopping cart (Classroom 3, December 6, 8:30am; Rita = age 5, Wallace = age 6).

Rita appeared conflicted when she realized that what she had learned from her mother differed from her older peer's opinion. She resolved this personal conflict by coming to a compromise. Rita was able to use the wallet (as she had learned from her mother) but placed it into a purse, which was what her classmate had instructed as the appropriate prop to be used in the shopping script. This example illustrates how the children enacted adult roles that mirrored their parents' shopping behaviors, but they were influenced and modified by peer influence. Thus, the data reveals that peer influence took

place in a variety of ways, even impacting behaviors previously learned from observing and interacting with parents in the real grocery store shopping context.

Discussion

This study makes an important contribution to the marketing literature. Specifically, the majority of the literature to date examines individual (i.e., cognitive) factors as they impact children and their behavior (see Roedder John, 1999). However, recent publications have proposed that a wider set of factors can directly impact the development and socialization of children as consumers (Cowell, 2001; Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002). This paper supports this wider view and addresses the social aspect of peer influence and its impact on the consumer behavior of young children. Thus, this study sheds light on the relatively unexplored relationship between peer influence and the consumer socialization of children.

The data show that peers do in fact shape young children's shopping scripts. This is one of the first studies to have observed children and their behaviors in a context that is relatively free of direct adult interaction and influence. A strong pattern in the data emerged, illustrating that even young children can be socialized by their peers with respect to consumer behavior and shopping scripts. The young children that participated in this study did in fact teach, influence, and socialize one another with respect to grocery store shopping behaviors. These findings extend previous marketing research (i.e., Roedder John, 1999) that argues that it is not until the later stages of child development (age seven through eleven; the analytical stage) that children exhibit significant peer-to-peer influence in the consumer socialization process.

Previous research has found that young children can enact adult shopping scripts (Roedder John, 1999). This particular study corroborates such research. Findings indicate that even very young children (i.e., age three) were able to successfully adopt and utilize adult shopping scripts while playing within the grocery store shopping context. The behaviors of these young children were quite sophisticated as the researchers found that they exhibited adult-like shopping styles, understood appropriate usage of the shopping cart, demonstrated check-out line etiquette, and knew that groceries were to be delivered to the home after purchase.

This study also sheds light on the childhood obesity epidemic. The children in this study showed a clear preference for certain types of foods (i.e., those that were less healthy such as ice cream or those that had higher sugar content as in the case of fruits versus vegetables). In addition, the data showed that the children exhibited a tendency toward over-abundance in that they often filled their carts to the point of overflowing before proceeding to the check-out line. These findings suggest that these young children have already ingrained taste and food preferences and behaviors that are either innate or that they have learned prior to the age of three.

Despite showing personal food preferences, the majority of interactions among the children were not focused on food products. Most interactions involved the cashier directing others on how to perform the script, such as how to complete a task related his/her job (i.e., how to bag the groceries) or how to complete the monetary transaction (i.e., the amount to pay or how to get change). When some children tried to influence the product selections of others, it was not well received. In fact, help with product selection was outright rejected. Thus, future research needs to examine the difference between direct interaction (i.e., a child telling another what to choose) versus more subtle cues (i.e., a child watching an opinion leader select his/her products and then following the pattern) as they relate to peer influence, food choice, and consumer socialization.

In addition to being the most social role, the cashier was the most embraced job in the grocery store. The cashier appeared to be in charge of the role enactment within the store, often directing the

bagger and shoppers on how to behave and perform the script. The finding that the majority of the interactions revolved around monetary transactions and job performance has interesting implications. These findings suggest that even at early ages in life (ages 3-6), money and credit appear important to daily life. Even when the younger students (classes 1 and 2) were not given play money, they talked about it and simulated monetary exchange. The older students (classroom 3, ages 4-6) were especially focused on the physical money, counting it, putting it in wallets and purses, and talking about the credit cards, in addition to using the bills, coins, and cards to complete the exchange. The findings also suggest that certain types of jobs (i.e., those that are more social or more directive, as in the cashier) are preferred to others that are more solitary and physical (i.e., the stocker having to put away the foods by him/herself). Clearly, this study's findings suggest the need for future research on more than the shopping behaviors of young children. Future research should examine the production related scripts and behaviors of children as well as their understanding and usage of money, credit, and banking.

Marketers are increasingly targeting children with their strategies (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004; Salinsky, 2006). In fact if a marketer can capture a child when he/she is young, the individual is more likely to be a life-long customer (Deriemaeker et al., 2007; Dholakia, 1984). Children are being socialized for consumption at very early ages, from a variety of sources including schools, peers, parents, and television (Cowell, 2001). The young children in this study exhibited sophisticated, adult-like shopping behaviors (e.g., a five year old girl asking for a certain brand of credit card). The findings of this study stand in contrast to previous research in that they suggest that even at early ages (i.e., age three) peers can influence the socialization of consumer behavior. Given that children are spending increasing amounts of time alone and have growing decision-making power, marketers are likely to continue to target children (Grimm 2004). In addition, this study shows that role enactment and dramatic play are effective forms of teaching small children about shopping and consumer behavior. Advertisers certainly show role enactment via advertisements directed at children, but marketers are also using more sophisticated techniques that may be capitalizing on this type of learning. For example, marketers are targeting children through school programs (Salinsky, 2006; Kunkel et al., 2004; Linn, 2004; McNeal, 1992) and retail outlets are simulating adult role playing for young children (e.g., manicures, pedicures, and spa treatments purchased by young girls at Club Libby Lu; Lee & Stead, 2007).

This study fuels the debate over the role of marketers in the consumer socialization of young children. Young children are vulnerable and impressionable. They have few cognitive defenses and have yet to learn skepticism with respect to marketing practices. In fact, this study's findings suggest that in environments outside of the home, such as school or playing at another child's house, even very young children are being socialized about consumer behavior by their peers. Even within the home, the parent is not always present to regulate and filter the information being communicated to his/her child from their peers or the television. Thus, this study's findings support the call for marketers to proceed with the highest ethical standards, as parents may be uncomfortable with marketing strategies that emphasize peer influence because it takes away the socialization away from the primary caretaker of the child and places it in the hands of other young children.

This study also reveals some unanswered questions about young children and their socialization, suggesting directions for future research. For example, there is a need for studies that examine the role of gender in this context. Because gender differences were not the focus of this study, the authors could not determine any clear difference in gender roles in the data. But during data analysis, the authors found themselves questioning whether gender differences existed in the various roles of cashier, shopper, and bagger. For example, do young boys and girls differ in their tendencies to be more aggressive or more reserved when performing these roles? Is there a gender difference in the

amount and types of peer influence that occurs among young children? In addition, future research should examine the shopping styles of girls versus boys for differences in peer-to-peer socialization and behavior.

Future research should also investigate children's food choices in greater depth. While the present study reveals that children tend to select familiar foods and less nutritious foods, future research should examine children's food choices, independent of parental influence, relative to their typical eating habits. For example, do children select less nutritious foods because they are accustomed to eating them at home or because they are deprived of them at home? Also, indirect peer influence on food choice was observed in the present study; however, direct peer influence on food choice, especially among children in the perceptual stage (ages three through seven), warrants further investigation.

Finally, the peer-to-peer interaction and influence that took place in this study primarily revolved around the role of the cashier. However, baggers often exhibited an interesting tendency toward "friendly" customer service. These findings suggest a need for future research that examines the customer service expectations of young children in the shopping context and how it relates to consumer socialization. This is an area of research that could benefit from both observations and experiments.

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