

THE CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION PROCESS IN THE CHILD-YOUTH MARKET
AND ITS STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR RETAILERS

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Abstract

The socialization process that takes place in the child-youth market, provides a guideline for the retail marketing strategy. This article first explores the importance of this market. After this exploration, an attempt is made to identify different marketing strategies at different stages of the socialization process. The rest of the paper elaborates upon how marketing strategy for the child-youth market can be developed.

Introduction

Socialization is a broad term for the process by which an individual assimilates or learns the culture in which he is reared. It is through this process that the characteristics of his everyday life are determined (Zigler and Child 1969). Through interactions with other people and with various environmental factors, he develops his specific pattern of socially relevant behavior experience. This process can be viewed as an organized behavioral system of exchange.

The consumer socialization process is characterized by attitude formulation which includes the learning of social roles and the concomitant behavior patterns. As social creatures, individuals continually observe, learn, and preserve the norms, folkways, values, beliefs, and attributes of others in the same society. This is the initial development of knowledge, attitudes, and consumption patterns which are relevant to the individuals' functioning as consumers (Ward 1974).

It has been stated that the child learns adult behavior patterns, adult values, and anxieties through his childhood experiences. These experiences therefore influence profoundly the formation and composition of cognitive patterns and behavior in later stages of the life cycle (Gesell and Ilg 1974). During the transition from childhood to adulthood, each of the child's actions is reinforced, punished, or ignored. In the child's environment, various stimuli are associated consistently with one another (Gesell and Ilg 1974). Berelson and Steiner (1964) state that opinions, attitudes, and beliefs are "inherited" (psychologically and sociologically) from one's parents; children learn them early and that learning persists into adulthood.

This paper presents a discussion of the child-youth market's size and sales potential, followed by a review of the consumer socialization process as it relates to retailing. In the discussion, the consumer socialization process of the child is analyzed in the form of a fourstage model. Finally, the relationship and importance of the process to marketing are presented in a series of general propositional statements.

The Child-Youth Market

The child-youth market, as defined here, includes individuals from age 3 to 19. The closest breakdown of U.S. Census Bureau figures shows that in 1979, 61.371 million or 28% of the total population was contained within this age span (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1980). Despite the declining birth rate, it has been projected

that by 1990, this segment will be 60 million strong and will drop only slightly to approximately 25% of the total population and remain there through the year 2000 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1977).

The importance of this young market and the consideration that it should receive from astute retailers stem from youth's significant discretionary purchasing power. According to U.S. Census Bureau figures for 1978, there were 14,966,000 people between the ages of 14 and 19 earning incomes totaling \$24.442 billion (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1980). The median income of year-round full time workers in 1974 for males and females between the ages 14 and 19 was \$7,079 and \$5,928, respectively (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1980).

Income figures for children aged 3 to 13 are most difficult to obtain. Income from part-time jobs, allowances, or monetary gifts provided the child market with substantial purchasing power. Some years ago a study (McNeal 1969) estimated average weekly expenditures of children to be about \$1.10. If we were to assume that this figure has gone up to \$3.20/week, in 1980 the child market would have increased approximately \$6.1 billion. Perhaps the most important aspect of this group's purchasing power is related to the influence they exert on virtually all of parents' purchases. One study indicated that approximately 15% of the time teenagers have sole influence on key family purchase decisions (Samli and Windeshausen 1965). However, information on this influential power is extremely limited; thus, the full significance of the child-youth market remains to be established.

The Socialization Process's Influence on Young Consumers

The socialization process is triggered by social expectations and exchanges which influence the behavior associated with various roles. Through the different stages of the socialization process, the individual will experience the impact of new roles (such as those adopted in adolescence) which may modify or change completely the previously learned patterns. In the process of learning these new roles, the young individual acquires various attitudes, knowledge, and values which affect his role as a consumer. Due to the influence exerted upon it by these roles, consumer behavior is viewed as a second-order consequence of more fundamental aspects of social learning (Ward 1974).

Throughout the socialization process, there is a multitude of cultural factors influencing the child's buying behavior. Seven of the more important cultural factors are the following: family, peers, marketing, outside adults, community members, teachers, and community organizations. In order to understand and appreciate the full implications of the consumer socialization process, one should analyze it from two different perspectives: the exogenous factors influencing the individual (including the seven cultural factors mentioned earlier), and the analysis of the individual himself throughout the process. The latter approach is utilized in this paper.

The Four Stages of Consumer Socialization

During the childhood and adolescence stages, individuals develop a set of expectations about products and services -- "a standard package" that they will own as adults (Reisman and Roseborough 1955). It is reasonable to assert that this standard package also includes retail establishments (Samli and Windeshausen 1964). Children begin to learn the consumer role through actual "participation, observation, and training" (McNeal 1969). Additionally, they commence learning values and attitudes which prepare them for the role of adult consumer. There are four stages in the individual's life cycle which are considered to be significant from the retailers' point of view (Gordon 1971). These are discussed in this paper (Figure 1) and are presented in descending order according to their degree of influence in the consumer socialization process. Since there is little evidence that early childhood and infancy stages are important for the retailing sector, the Oedipal period is the first life cycle stage presented.

Oedipal Period. This is the period during which the consumer socialization process commences (Alexander 1969). Parents are the key sources of values and information which are transmitted through instruction and selective reinforcement of special responses (Breckenridge and Vincent 1964). The child also begins to interact with other children; hence, it becomes important for him to obtain acceptance by his peers (Garrison, Kingston and Bernard 1967).

Later childhood. The child makes his initial venture into the world of school in this phase, and he experiences the uncertainty and instability resulting from the behavioral expectations of others. The focal point in the child's social orientation begins shifting from his family to the peer group (Bossard and Bell 1969). As the child's involvement in the peer group's activities increases, he develops a growing preference for association with this group. Other behavioral characteristics manifested in this period are rapid development of social consciousness; major interest in group activities; increasing susceptibility to social approval and disapproval; and a growing revolt against adult domination (Bossard and Bell 1969). During this period, the teacher plays a key role in conveying societal demands and expectations (Garrison, Kingston and Bernard 1967). In addition, early in this stage television begins to play a major role in the socialization process.

Early Adolescence. This is an important period in which various manifestations of antisocial behavior appear with a definite backward trend in social adjustments (Bossard and Bell 1969). The youth joins own-sex peer groups and learns to cope with the continuing stress upon valued personal qualities--ethnicity, social class, and gender role attributes such as sexual attractiveness (Kagan, Coles and Coles 1972). His choice of group membership expands to involve family, peer crowd or cliques, "official" school groups, and the wider world of social class, socioeconomic status, and ethnic subcultures. He gains autonomy from the formal parental authority structure while gaining emotional peer support through conformity to the "youth culture norms." Buying behavior develops accordingly, as shopping with peers increases and shopping with parents decreases. Radio and TV have an even more influential impact on the developing consumer role than they did at the previous stage.

Later Adolescence. This period is the stage in which the youth completes his transition from childhood to maturity. The struggle for autonomy is facilitated by high school, college, and work-setting sub-cultures. During this period, the youth's discretionary income increases substantially. Additionally, with peers continuing to exert strong influence on youth's buying behavior, a proclivity toward fads becomes more evident. The majority of purchases are made independently of parents, consequently, with the youth cultivating his own specific brand and store preference.

Available Forms of Purchase Influence for Young Consumers

As a consumer the young individual has four forms of influence for securing desired products: Personal purchase by the child, direct requests at home, direct requests in the store, and passive dictation (Wells 1965). The first three are direct attempts and are rather self-explanatory. Passive dictation can be explained as the child's way of influencing the parent's purchase of products. By simply observing the child's consumption habits in terms of what he consumes willingly and what he resists, the parents can ascertain easily the child's preferences (Ward 1974).

In each stage of the socialization process, the young individual will select from his repertoire the form of influence or the combination of influence approaches which he perceives as having the highest probability of maximizing his satisfaction. Figure 1 lists the form(s) of influence utilized in the different stages. These are presented in descending order according to their frequency and effectiveness in securing desired products.

Strategic Consideration for the Retailer

Figure 2 illustrates the logical flow of the decision-making process by a retail establishment as directed toward the child-youth market. Three key points are particularly critical in the diagram. First, the retailer must decide whether present or future emphasis is more important in dealing with the child-youth market. Second, the age categories of the child-youth market must be determined. Finally, the target for the advertising and other promotional activities must be selected. Within the context of this flowchart, there are numerous strategies available to the retailer. Despite the fact that the retailing sector has multifarious marketing practices available for developing a marketing strategy, the majority of retailers have failed to produce and implement a complete and clearly delineated strategy.

The following discussion is not meant to be thorough or exhaustive; rather, it presents certain key (although over-simplified) strategies which can be used by the retailer at different stages in the socialization process.

- Offer merchandise for children but appeal to parents and other adults for purchase. (Adult appeal)
- Offer merchandise for children, but focus appeal primarily on parents and other adults for purchase; however, try to attract the children to the store to encourage overt request of parents in store by the children. (Adult appeal II)

FIGURE 1
FOUR STAGES OF THE CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

<u>Life Cycle Stage</u> ¹	<u>Size (1973)</u> ²	<u>Most Significant Others</u> ³	<u>Form(s) of Influence Utilized</u> ⁴	<u>Retail Strategy</u>
I. <u>Oedipal Period</u> (3-5 years)	9.665 million	Mother Father Television Same Sex Peers Siblings	Direct Request at Home Direct Request in Store Passive Dictation Personal Purchase	Adult Appeal
II. <u>Later Childhood</u> (6-11 years)	20.429 million	Parents Television Same Sex Peers Teachers	Direct Request at Home Direct Request in Store Personal Purchase Passive Dictation	Adult Appeal II Child-Adult Appeal
III. <u>Early Adolescence</u> (12-15 years)	14.948 million	Television, Radio Parents Same Sex Peers Opposite Sex Peers Teachers	Direct Request at Home Personal Purchase Passive Dictation Direct Request in Store	Youth Appeal
IV. <u>Later Adolescence</u> (16-19 years)	16.326 million	Same Sex Peers Opposite Sex Television, Radio Parents Teachers Loved One Wife or Husband	Personal Purchase Passive Dictation Direct Request in Store Direct Request at Home	Youth Appeal II

¹G. Gordon, "Socialization Across the Life-Cycle: A Stage Developmental Model," Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, 1969, and "Role and Value Development Across the Life-Cycle," in a symposium on role theory, ed. by J. Jackson, Sociological Studies IV, Role (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

²"Population Profile of the United States: 1979," Current Population Reports, Series p. 20, No. 350, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, May 1980; where exact age group statistics were not available, they were estimated through interpolation.

³G. Gordon, most significant others are listed in descending order in terms of their degree of influence in the consumer socialization process.

⁴W. Wells, "Communicating with Children," Journal of Advertising Research, V (June 1965), pp. 2-14; forms of influence are listed in descending order in terms of their frequency and effectiveness in securing desired products.

-Offer merchandise for children and appeal to adults as well as the children. Make sure that displays and the layout in the store are persuasive enough for direct requests at home and direct requests in store. (Child-adult appeal)

-Offer merchandise for the youth market, appealing primarily to the youth. Make sure that the displays and store layout are adequate, and also that the merchandise mix is appropriate for peer interaction and opinion leaders' approval. Put special emphasis on TV and radio advertising geared directly to the youth market. (Youth appeal)

-Offer merchandise for the youth market with appeal to the youth market exclusively. Assure adequate merchandise mix, displays, and store layout; in addition, develop special customer services such as special credit card, specially trained salespeople, liberal return policy, celebrity guests, and the like -- all geared to the youth. In other words, make sure that the "atmospherics" are adequate. Put special emphasis on TV and radio advertising directed specifically to the youth market. (Youth appeal II)

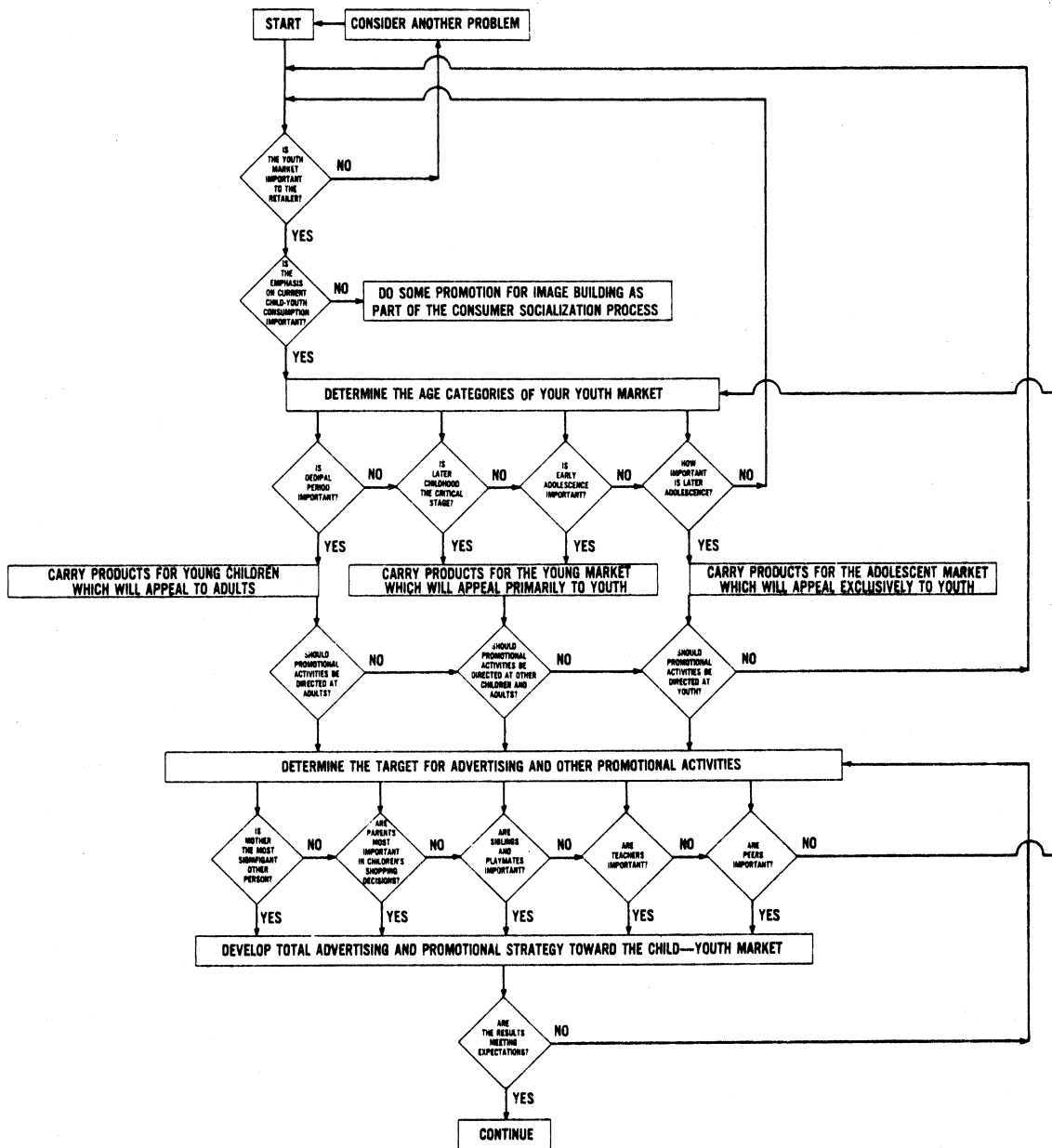
In **Figure 1** a general suggestion is made for the strategies appropriate in each stage of the socialization process. There are numerous other strategies plus variations of the ones discussed above. It is important for the retailer to ascertain the specific characteristics of his target market(s) in order to develop a precise marketing strategy for successfully reaching the child-youth market.

Figure 3 illustrates how each marketing mix component for the child-youth market could be utilized in each of these five strategies. If, for instance, the retailer wants to use merchandise mix for children to be a focal aspect of its child-youth market strategy, that retailer will either use adult appeal or adult appeal II.

Although the marketing mix components in different strategies, the **Figure** illustrates what can be done to plan the child-youth marketing strategy. The retail establishment, by developing its own sequel to **Figure 3**, could plan effectively as to taking advantage of the opportunities in this important market.

FIGURE 2

THE LOGICAL FLOW OF RETAILING STRATEGY TOWARD THE CHILD-YOUTH MARKET



Examples of Special Marketing Practices

A small sample of the numerous activities currently being used in retailing is presented below.

1. Kroger has been distributing cookie credit cards to children in the elementary schools which can be presented at the bakery department when the child is accompanied by an adult. (Adult appeal II)
2. Robin of "Batman and Robin" spends every Saturday in different shopping centers promoting merchandise to the youth. (Adult appeal and Adult appeal II)
3. Stix Baer and Fuller in St. Louis formerly sponsored the televised Saturday dances for young people on their premises. (Adult appeal and Youth appeal)
4. Ronald McDonald of McDonald Hamburgers visits grand openings of McDonald Restaurants to attract youth. (Adult appeal II and Youth appeal)
5. Santa Claus not only visits toy departments of department stores but frequently stays in the store throughout the Christmas shopping season. (Child-Adult appeal)
6. Dairy Queen has a Dennis the Menace Dairy Queen Birthday Club which offers children free food on their birthdays. (Adult appeal II)
7. Sam Goody's raffles off tickets to major rock concerts in order to attract youth into its stores to purchase records and audio equipment. (Youth appeal)

FIGURE 1
ELEMENTS OF THE FOUR CHILD-YOUTH MARKETING STRATEGIES
GEARED TO THE FOUR STAGES OF THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Marketing Mix Components	Marketing Strategies				
	I	II	III	IV	V
Merchandise Mix for Children	+	+	-	-	-
Merchandise Mix for the Youth Market	-	-	+	+	+
Point of Purchase Displays for Children	+	+	-	-	-
Point of Purchase Displays for the Youth	-	-	+	+	+
Point of Purchase Displays for Adults	+	+	+	-	-
Store Layout for Children	+	+	-	-	-
Store Layout for the Youth	-	-	+	+	+
Store Layout for Adults	+	+	-	-	-
Promotion to Children	-	+	-	-	-
Promotion to the Youth	-	-	+	+	+
Promotion to Adults	+	+	-	-	-
Customer Services for Children	+	+	-	-	-
Customer Services for the Youth	-	-	+	+	+
Customer Services for Adults	+	+	-	-	-
Atmospherics for Children	+	+	-	-	-
Atmospherics for the Youth	-	-	+	+	+
Atmospherics for Adults	+	+	-	-	-

I=adult appeal, II=adult appeal II, III=child-adult appeal, IV=youth appeal, V=youth appeal II. (+) implies emphasizing, (-) implies de-emphasizing, and (+-) implies a combination.

8. Country Legend in Southwest Virginia offers a complete line of denim jeans and other related jeans products with the entire store geared to attract the college town's young population. (Youth appeal II)

Concluding Comments

For retailers, awareness and responsiveness to the concept of adult life cycles have long been recognized as critical for assuring successful operations. Equally critical but historically neglected are the retailer's awareness and responsiveness to the consumer socialization process during the "child-youth life cycle."

Unlike the early stages of this process, as socialization approaches completion, parental influence in the youth's purchase decisions becomes less pronounced. Accompanying this declining parental influence is an increasing conformity by the youth to the "youth culture" norms as his consumer role continues to expand. Consequently, because of these changes occurring to the young population, it is imperative that the retailer choose a specific marketing strategy which treats this market as a viable and important segment. In developing such a strategy, it is of extreme importance that the retailer understands the "most significant others" who not only influence the attitudes and values of the youth, but who can serve also as opinion leaders. Because of this dual role, the opinion leaders for each stage of the consumer socialization process can change with changes in the "most significant others" as illustrated in Figure 1. Consequently, the changing "most significant others" must be observed carefully by the retailer so that he can take full advantage of the two-step flow of communication.

The following general statements may hold importance for future research and/or for retail strategy formulation.

The four stages of the consumer socialization process are distinct and detectable in the child-youth market.

At each stage of the process, different roles are attributed to different people, thus forming the most important outside influencing factors in the attitude and behavior of consumer trainees.

Retail merchandising and promotion geared directly to the child-youth market are more productive than relying solely on the discretion of parents and other adults.

An awareness, understanding, and utilization of the consumer socialization process are critical for effective retailing to the child-youth market.

In order to cultivate successfully the child-youth market, retailers must implement one or more specific retail strategies which incorporate knowledge of the consumer socialization process.

In the two-step flow of communication, the "most significant others" serve in the opinion leader roles.

Both large and small retail institutions have special interest in the child-youth market, not only as a currently viable segment, but also as a major portion of the future market. Consequently, future research of the consumer socialization process and its relationship to retailing is needed in order to provide guidelines for future retailing activities.

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