Roundtable  Expanding the Boundaries of Consumer Socialization Research
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The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to address potential new directions in consumer socialization research. Four discussion facilitators outlined gaps in current knowledge and suggested some interesting issues that may provide fruitful avenues for future investigation. Greg Rose led discussion on socialization differences in individualistic vs. collectivist cultures. Specifically, individualistic cultures foster independence, whereas collectivist cultures stress dependence. Within these societies, both authoritarian and neglecting parental styles are found, while authoritative and permissive parental styles are found primarily in individualistic cultures, and protective and indulgent styles are more prevalent in collectivist cultures. The more restrictive and dependent parental styles found in collectivist cultures limit children’s consumption autonomy, whereas the parenting practices in individualistic cultures that stress independence lead to children’s acquiring consumer skills and understanding earlier. There are, however, a number of issues that have received scant attention. First, the issue of social development, particularly in individualistic societies has not been thoroughly examined. Second, there is a need to examine diversity within the United States and its implications for consumer socialization. There is also a need to examine the potential for adaptiveness in parental styles. Do these styles change over time? If so, how and what implications would such changes hold for consumer socialization? Finally, the links between the personality of the child, parental styles, and consumer socialization outcomes have not been systematically examined. In particular, the role of birth order, child’s temperament, and consistency of parental styles across siblings and across parents are interesting issues to address in the future.

The second discussion facilitator, Sandy Grossbart, identified socialization contexts that have not been thoroughly examined. These unique and unfamiliar contexts may offer new and interesting insights into understanding consumer socialization. Contexts that are new to consumers, such as the internet, moving to a new location, and life transitions and their attendant rituals provide unique needs as well as opportunities for consumers and thus for learning through socialization. Such contexts also highlight the overemphasis on children in studies of consumer socialization. Clearly, there are many life transitions that adults experience and in which unique socializing influences occur. Consumer socialization, rather than ending when one becomes an adult, is an ongoing process. A second issue identified was that there is a need to examine the goals of the individual in the socialization process. Traditionally research has focused on the acquisition of skills, knowledge and attitudes as outputs of the socialization process. A predominately cognitive, problem-solving perspective has dominated the consumer socialization literature. However, other goals, such as personal expression, social navigation, and connection/affiliation may also be important to consumers and, as result, addressed through the socialization process. Finally, there is a need to examine socialization within networks and by groups and what implications the interconnectedness of social relationships has for the socialization process. Socialization agents are aware that others are involved in the socialization process. Also, groups may socialize individuals into a way of life. The role of groups and social networks in the socialization process would seem to be a particularly fruitful avenue for future inquiry.

Kay Palan facilitated discussion on the need to examine the relationship between consumer socialization and consumer competence, noting that the possession of consumer skills does not necessarily lead to competence. Competence may be context-dependent, in that socialization that fosters competence in specific consumer settings may lead to vulnerabilities in other contexts. There is also a need to examine the interactive effect of and between different socialization agents. Much research has focused on parental socialization agents. Less is known about the effects of other socialization agents, such as institutions, the internet, and consumer communities and how these differing influences combine to affect the socialization process. The emphasis on parental socialization agents is consistent with the emphasis on children’s consumer socialization that has characterized past research. However, there is a need to examine consumer socialization and the development of consumer competence over the life course. Indeed, the consumer socialization of adults has received very little attention. In addition, past research has focused on pre-purchase and purchase skills and competence, and yet policy makers and marketers are increasingly interested in the post-purchase behaviors that may be learned through socialization.

The final facilitator, Terry Bristol, focused the discussion on potential negative consequences of the socialization process. Past research has tended to examine the acquisition of positive consumer skills, attitudes, and behaviors. However, there are likely to be negative outcomes associated with specific types of socialization as well. For example, deception, overindulgence/lack of self-control, materialism, and similar maladaptive behaviors, attitudes, and values may be learned through the socialization process as well as more proconsumer skills. Identification of the processes associated with negative outcomes, as well as an understanding of the negative outcomes themselves, may be helpful in developing modifications of such socializing influences and/or effective interventions.

In summary, the roundtable discussion identified a number of potential directions for future research. First, there is a need to examine socialization in different contexts and consumer settings. More qualitative research methods would be especially helpful in this regard. Second, there is a need to look beyond the family and incorporate the effects of other socializing influences, including communities, networks, and institutions. The interactive effects of multiple socialization agents also needs to be addressed. Third, there is a need to move beyond the consumer socialization of children and to recognize more fully that consumer socialization is a life-long process; much work needs to be done on the consumer socialization of adults. Finally, more attention needs to be paid to understanding the outputs of the socialization process, including consumer competence as well as specific positive and negative outcomes of consumer socialization.