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## Beyond functional purposes

An exploratory study on the contribution of  
children's books to their socialization as  
consumers

### **Supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Vladi Finotto  
(Ch. Prof. Luca Massimiliano Visconti)

### **Graduand**

Elisabetta Rossi  
Matriculation Number 810328

## Résumé

Cette étude offre une contribution sur les procédés de consommation qui se font jour dans le cas de livres d'enfants, et évalue combien cette représentation peut contribuer à leur socialisation en tant que consommateurs attentifs et critiques. Au centre de cette recherche, conçue comme une continuation et une variation sur celles de Ginman et Lundquist, il y a une analyse systématique de toutes les activités de consommation effectuée sur l'échantillon des six livres d'enfants les plus populaires en Italie en avril 2016, pour les catégories « Aventure » et « Questions familiales, personnelles et sociales ». Après une enquête sur ce thème, cette recherche parvient à la conclusion que les livres offrent aux jeunes consommateurs une formation incomplète, même si certains progrès sont visibles, en particulier quant à l'existence de systèmes alternatifs d'échanges, des différentes possibilités offertes par les nouvelles technologies, ainsi que des problèmes sociaux et environnementaux liés à la consommation. Certaines questions restent en relation avec l'influence importante des normes sociales, de la représentation des activités illégales, comme le vol ou les comportements anormaux.

De façon générale, les auteurs devraient être plus attentifs au contenu descriptif et normatif des livres pour enfants concernant le système économique et les différentes phases du processus de consommation, ainsi qu'à la mesure dans laquelle cette information peut affecter le système de valeur des enfants.

## **Abstract**

In the present study a contribution is given on the extent to which consumption is represented in children books and how this representation can contribute to their socialization as aware and critical consumers. At the center of the research, conceived as a continuation and variation of the one of Ginman and Lundquist, there is the systematic analysis of all consumption activities represented in a sample composed by the six most popular children's books in Italy in the month of April 2016 in the category "Adventure" and "Family, personal and social issues". Coherently to that previous exploration on the topic, it is concluded that books offer an incomplete training of young consumers, even if some improvements are visible, in particular in regard to the inclusion of alternative exchange systems, different possibilities offered by new technologies, and social and environmental problems related to consumption. Some concerns remain in relation to the strong influence of cultural assumption and social norms, to the representation of illegal activities, such as stealing, and dysfunctional behaviors.

Books' authors should be in general more sensitive to the descriptive and normative content of children's books related to the economic system and the various stages of the consumption process, as well as to the extent to which this information can affect the belief system of children.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The present research project has the aim of exploring to what extent consumption is represented in children's books and how they can learn from books to become more aware and critical consumers; in other words, to assess books' contribution to children's socialization as consumers. Therefore, the research questions that stand at the center of the analysis and inform all aspects of the research path are the following: *How is consumption portrayed in children's books? To what extent this representation can contribute to their socialization as consumer?*

## 1.2 Relevance of the Research

The present study represents a qualitative exploration of consumption representation in a relatively small sample of six popular books in Italy, chosen from the two categories of "Adventure" and "Family, social and personal problems" and therefore does not have any presumption of being comprehensive and providing conclusive and generalizable findings. It benefits from the contribution of the literature on the fields of consumption behavior, including social and cultural aspects of the matter, the one of consumers' socialization, and other studies related to the domain of psychology. It aims at contributing to the existing literature on the topic of consumer socialization, next to Ginman and Lundquist's contribution<sup>1</sup>, since this is the only other specific research on non-education books as a meaning of learning. The existing literature on children stories, in fact, focuses on aspects different from consumption or adopts a more narrow approach; no contributions have been added on the matter in the last two years.

From a social viewpoint, the present research can contribute to the understanding of the learning of a complex and pervasive phenomenon such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014.

one of consumption, starting from the consideration that it is something that one can learn. The increasing relevance of the phenomenon is also due to the fact that nowadays we assist to a significant change in the role of consumer, that is increasingly shifting from a “passive” position to a more informed and responsible role, that puts him/her in charge of *choosing* instead of simply consuming; moreover, since every consumption activity can potentially carry on multiple consequences, not only for the individual but also for the society and the environment as a whole, it is urgent to gain universal awareness of the consequences at systemic level of everyday consumption choices.

From a more “managerial” viewpoint, we can consider knowledge on consumption behavior and consumption mechanisms as a precious asset to understand the needs of perspective customers and therefore serve the reference market in the best way possible. In other terms, knowing the consumption patterns that are learned and assimilated by children can contribute to a better understanding of their role as adult consumers.

### **1.3 Why books?**

Starting from the assumption that children need to be helped to manage the complexity of consumption in current society, the decision to put children’s books at the center of the analysis came from two reasons.

First of all, there are many different socialization agents through which children can and actually learn to consume (such as people in their social circles, school, television and other media), but books have rarely been considered as deserving an in-depth analysis. Literature on the topic of narrative transportation and narrative persuasion shows how stories can be effective not only in entertaining the receivers but also in changing their belief system<sup>2</sup>, meaning that this feature is worth investigation.

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<sup>2</sup> See par. 2.5.1.

As a consequence it is here assumed that books can play an important role in shaping and influence children learning about consumption, to the extent to which this activity is represented within them. The number of consumption activities identified in the analyzed books, shows that they widely expose them to consumption, from the more practical aspects to the social and cultural norms governing it. It is therefore important to become conscious of their potential influence, behind the perception of “innocence” and “neutrality” often attached to them. This represents the second reason of interest.

## **1.4 Agenda**

The first part of the text is dedicated to a brief overview of the concept of consumption and a description of its complexity and of the central role it plays in our society. Consuming involves the collection and processing of a lot of information, complex decision-making processes, various kinds of evaluation mechanisms, the interaction with many economic players, and it contains a vast normative component. It seems therefore natural that in order to manage such a complex activity, standards and patterns of consumption are in place, and consumption behaviors should be understood and learned in order to cope with such complexity. The necessary knowledge deals not only with how consumption is carried out and which are the available alternatives, but also how it can shape our identities and the social dimension of consumption activities.

This learning of the functioning of society is proved to start at a very early stage of children development and therefore it seems particularly relevant to take into consideration books targeted at children from a very young age. Books are of course only one of the elements shaping the socialization process and transmitting relevant information to children: many other means such as parents, friends, school, television and other media are widely involved in the process<sup>3</sup>. Thus, in this first part of the research a discussion is also carried out on the particular role played by stories in

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<sup>3</sup> See all the discussion and references related to socialization agents in Ginman and Lundquist 2014, pp. 12-13.

children's learning process, especially through phenomena such as narrative transportation and narrative persuasion that, originally pertaining to the field of psychology, are now gaining popularity also in marketing.

The second chapter is dedicated to the explanation of the exploratory method that has been applied to conduct the analysis of six of the most popular books in Italy in the month of April 2016, from the choice of the sample, to the collection and elaboration of data to identify relevant themes and codes.

Then, through a systematic individuation and application of these themes and codes, a detailed picture is given of the representation of consumption in the selected children's books. Partial conclusions are provided at the end of each sub-section, combining the comments generated by the examples cited and the general knowledge coming from the whole books sample.

In the last part, conclusions are drawn about the representation of consumption in the different books, the variables that can influence this kind of choices (such as the purpose of the book, the complexity of the plot and so on), as well as the implications coming from this representation; some comments are made about the data that are missing and some directions are given for future research on the topic.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter is devoted to a brief discussion about the most relevant existing literature on the topic of consumption in general, the on its cultural and social aspects. The present view on the topic is partially influenced by Ginman and Lundquist's masters thesis on the contribution of children's book on children's consumer socialization<sup>4</sup>, as the present research aims to represent a continuation and variation on their study, with a shift in the focus from popular children's books written in English, to popular children's books in Italy.

Starting from a similar point of view, after an attempt to agree on a definition of consumption and a review of its complexity, some of the most relevant stream of research on the topic will be analyzed, to demonstrate the degree of complexity the literature has achieved. The scope will be to trace a path through the literature, pointing out the most relevant observations to the scope of the present work.

Starting from a general definition, the focus of this review will be progressively narrowed, to the point of considering a relevant part of the existing literature on narrative transportation and persuasion, keeping an eye on the impact of stories on children and their possible role as a medium for children's socialization as consumers.

### ***2.1 A concept of consumption***

First of all, before starting to analyze consumption activities, an attempt should be done to agree on a definition of consumption, in order also to agree on which activities should be properly considered as *consumption*. It is of fundamental importance to reflect on a definition, since most scholars seem to have assumed this concept and its importance as self-evident. The title of this section accounts for the

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<sup>4</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014.

the difficulty of reaching a consensus on a common meaning of the word, since it involves many sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects.

The Oxford Dictionary states that ‘to consume’ comes from the Latin *consumer*, from con- ‘altogether’ + *sumere* ‘take up’; reinforced by French *consumer*<sup>5</sup>. The two most relevant definitions in the dictionary for my purposes are the following:

- Eat, drink, or ingest (food or drink): *people consume a good deal of sugar in drinks.*
- Buy (goods or services): *accounting provides measures of the economic goods and services consumed.*<sup>6</sup>

The first appears to be related with a sort of “primitive” idea of consumption, an effective and still meaningful metaphor for the whole category of consumption activities, if it is to be held true that “almost all forms of human self-expression or enjoyment are now being seen as analogous to eating food”<sup>7</sup>.

There has been also an historical shift in the connotation of the word *consumption*: before the publishing of political economy literature in the late eighteenth century, when Smith and Ricardo start using the term as the opposite of *production*, the word *consumption* only had a negative meaning, being used in almost all cases as a synonymous of waste<sup>8</sup>. However, this new positive eighteenth-century definition still did not have anything to do with the modern notion of consumption, more strictly related to humans’ desires and their satisfaction.

In fact, a different concept of consumption appeared, mainly in England and France, together with the idea of *consumer society* or *consumerism*. This means that a significant portion of the population started to organize its life around the pursuit of something called *consumer goods*, defined not as bare necessities, but as objects of desire, subject to the voluble oscillations of fashion. From this moment on,

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<sup>5</sup> For some significant etymological considerations see Graeber 2001, pp. 491-492.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Dictionary Online: ‘consume’.

<sup>7</sup> Graeber 2011. Also R. Wilk, as cited in Graeber 2011, states that the term ‘consumption’ is essentially a metaphor of eating.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to notice that the term “consumption” was among the ones used to talk about tuberculosis.

*consumption* started to be recognized more often as an important form of “creative self-expression”<sup>9</sup>.

It should be evident that by simply analyzing a dictionary definition, even something that we may think as straightforward can be described in many different ways and perceived differently as well, depending on the historical context, the cultural and social framework, the field of research where the word has been used.

In his relevant contribution, Graeber makes an ultimate attempt at finding a useful notion of consumption that could resolve some conceptual problems in possessive individualism, after having identified the cultural bias in the analytical vocabulary related to consumption<sup>10</sup>. In the usual academic usage, *consumption* has come to mean “any activity that involves the purchase, use or enjoyment of any manufactured or agricultural product for any purpose other than the production or exchange of new commodities”<sup>11</sup>, meaning nearly anything done when not working for wages.

The most obvious conclusion drawn by the author is that we might begin to treat consumption “not as an analytical term but as an ideology to be investigated”<sup>12</sup>, adopting a symbolic perspective, we can conceive products as “vessels of meaning that signify similar across all consumers”<sup>13</sup>. More recently, the act of consuming has been viewed as a varied accomplishment undetermined by the characteristics of the object, in this way shifting the attention from the object of consumption activities, to its subjects: an object can be consumed in a variety of ways by different groups of

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<sup>9</sup> Graeber 2011, p. 491.

<sup>10</sup> Graeber 2001, p. 489: As stated before, in fact, there appears to be the need for a clarification of prominent relevance, since the common assumption of scholars concerning the category of consumption seems one of self-evidence, both in its definition and in its importance.

<sup>11</sup> Graeber 2001, p. 491.

<sup>12</sup> Graeber 2001, p. 500: “clearly, there are people in the world who do base key aspects of their identity around what they see as the destructive encompassment of manufactured products. Let us find out who these people really are, when they think of themselves this way and when they do not, and how they relate to others who conceive their relations to the material world differently”.

<sup>13</sup> Holt 1995, p. 1. In fact, if we remain strictly anchored to an economic perspective, we can conceive products as bundles of attributes that yield particular benefits and answers to particular needs. Anyway, both the traditional economic and the symbolic perspectives reflect a traditional view of the consumption activity as structured by the characteristics and properties of the consumption object.

consumers, thus meaning that the nature of the consumption activity depends on the consumer and not on the object of this action<sup>14</sup>.

This conclusion is particularly relevant for this specific research because this pervasive variation in consumer actions suggests a new focus of interest in assuming the perspective of the consumers and comprehensively describing the variety of ways in which people consume. This allows to understand how these differences vary across groups and situations, and to explain the unacknowledged conditions that structure how different groups consume.

Thus, it has been assessed that the concept of consumption and the way of looking at it has changed over time, cultures and disciplines, from a negative connotation, to a mirror for production in the monopoly capitalism of Adam Smith, to finally become in the *consumer society* a mirror to itself. This brings us now to relate the notion of consumption to other particularly relevant concepts in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The concept of consumption can for example be strictly related with the one of *desire*, noting that it needs to remain unequivocally distinct from *urges* or *intentions*. Desire is always rooted in imagination and tends to direct itself toward some kind of social relation, real or imaginary, and “that social relation generally entails a desire for some kind of recognition and hence an imaginative reconstruction of the self”.<sup>15</sup>

Generally speaking, the “legacy” left by most of the existing research has a lot to do with the idea that consumption is a particularly complex activity and therefore a research area with a nearly infinite potential for deeper investigation, at the condition of agreeing upon “motivating problems and questions to bind consumer researchers together in a common, distinguish intellectual project”, and to take into account both theoretical insights and formulations and empirical research; this allows to broaden the focus and to investigate also the experiential, social, and cultural dimensions of consumption in context<sup>16</sup>. This is also the scope of the present research project, although with some inevitable limitations.

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<sup>14</sup> For the whole discussion on this topic see Holt 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Graeber 2001, pp. 495.

<sup>16</sup> This belief can be synthetized in the motto “more field, less laboratory” (Holt 1995).

## ***2.2 A sample of complexity of consumption: theories and approaches***

After having recognized the inherent complexity of the topic of consumption and the fundamental necessity to consider both a multi-method theoretical approach and an empirical one, it is worth covering some recent relevant contributions in order to give an idea of the different streams of research going on. Although an analysis of the long evolution of our understanding of consumption lies outside the scope of the present study, this introduction aims to effectively highlight the many different ways in which consumption can be defined and perceived and the various disciplines involved in the explanation of such a complex activity.

Here follows a brief sample of some different theories that have been used and formulated around this topic, most of them consistent with the Consumer Culture Theory approach, which deploys cultural anthropology and social psychology for the understanding of markets.

Consumer Culture Theory is a perfect example of confluence of approaches, disciplines and methods, developed at the confluence of interest between anthropology and marketing<sup>17</sup> and Arnould and Thompson offer a quite comprehensive overview of the stream of CCT until 2005. The result of its efforts has been a more frank acknowledgement of consumption, considered as a sort of local idiom through which cultural forms express their creativity and diversity<sup>18</sup>. The acronym CCT, rather than representing a unified theory, refers to a “family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings”<sup>19</sup>, which share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of cultural complexity. CCT’s interdisciplinary research tradition<sup>20</sup> contributed firstly to unfold a “consumption cycle” that includes

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<sup>17</sup> Arnould and Thompson 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Baba 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 868.

<sup>20</sup> “Consumer culture has numerous heterogeneous manifestations such as the consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols, and the perpetuation and reproduction of this system, an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members’ experiences and lives, a densely woven network of global connections and extensions through which

acquisition, consumption and possession, and disposition processes and analysis of these phenomena from macro-, meso-, and micro-theoretical perspectives<sup>21</sup>; then its research agenda has been advanced over the following 20 years, to phenomena such as consumption and possession practices, particularly their hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions and, more precisely, “how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals”<sup>22</sup>. Another significant effort made by CCT is toward linking the individual level to different levels of cultural processes and structures, in this way contextualizing these relationships within historical and marketplace contexts. The marketplace is viewed as a source of individual and collective identity construction and illustrates “the symbolic, embodied, and experiential aspects of acquisition behaviors and the sociocultural complexities of exchange behaviors and relationships”<sup>23</sup>.

Moreover, two basic conceptual distinctions can be useful to organize how the different aspects of consuming have been treated in the literature: the *structure* of consumption and the *purpose* of consumption. In terms of structure, consuming consists both of actions in which consumers directly engage consumption objects (*object actions*) and interactions with other people in which consumption objects serve as a sort of focal resource (*interpersonal actions*). In terms of purpose, consumers’ actions can be either ends in themselves (*autotelic actions*) or means to some further ends (*instrumental actions*)<sup>24</sup>.

Nicosia and Mayer tried to give the deserved prominence to the societal context in which consumers operate, in the attempt of creating a sociology of consumption concerning three classes of variables: cultural values, institutions and their norms, and consumption activities, and all their possible interrelationships<sup>25</sup>.

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local cultures are increasingly interpenetrated by the forces of transnational capital and global mediascape”.

<sup>21</sup> Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 871; see Belk 1987, 1988; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1989; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; McCracken 1986; Mick 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 871; see also Thompson 1996; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 871 as cited by Ginman and Lundquist.

<sup>24</sup> Holbrook 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Nicosia and Mayer 1976, p. 69.

Despite some historical limitations and their strictly functional approach, their evocation of the existence of a marketplace<sup>26</sup> remains fundamental to the understanding of many consumption activities today.

Holt conducts a typological analysis of consumption practices, starting from the three streams that emerged from consumer research, portraying how people consume with the aid of a metaphor: consuming as experience, consuming as integration, and consuming as classification<sup>27</sup>. Consuming as experience is the metaphor for the consumers' subjective, emotional reactions to consumption objects (i.e. a psychological phenomenon); research relating to the consuming as integration metaphor describes how consumers acquire and manipulate object meanings, allowing themselves to access the object's symbolic properties; consuming as classification views consuming as a process in which objects, as vessels of cultural and personal meanings, act to classify their consumers. The "new" dimension of consuming as play is, then, used by Holt to describe how people can use consumption objects to play and develops the relationship between the aspect of consuming and the other three dimensions. In Holt's view, consumption is "a type of social action in which people make use of consumption objects in a variety of ways"<sup>28</sup>, therefore his research approach, followed by many other scholars, proposes a fundamental shift from *what* we consume, to *how* we consume it; it is also particularly useful on the methodological level, because it is conducted through an observational case study, which permits to refine and extend the typologies and to create an analytical vocabulary to describe how people consume and behave.

Among the cultural aspects of consumption, a notably important focus can be put also on the *meaning* of consumption activities.

In their famous contribution "Developmental Recognition of Consumption Symbolism", Belk, Bahn and Mayer proceed from the recognition that people have the intent to communicate through consumption and they view the object they possess

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<sup>26</sup> Nicosia and Mayer 1976 suggest that consumption usually involves spending *money*, implies some kind of *consumption good*, and requires *time*.

<sup>27</sup> Holt 1995, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Holt is here following Simmel 1950.

as an “extension of themselves”<sup>29</sup>, to examine the ability to recognize consumption symbolism and decoding consumption cues. Belk has further elaborated this same concept in another paper published in 1988<sup>30</sup>. According to the authors, the act of encoding and decoding consumption is an attaching of meaning to consumption and a deciphering of this meaning in the consumption of others. These actions are part of the “processes that allow us to communicate non-verbally and to achieve the satisfaction of self-expression through consumption”<sup>31</sup>. Their “experiment” on consumption symbolism is also very relevant for the purpose of the present research because they draw the conclusion that among children “the ability to recognize the social implications of consumption choices is minimal among preschoolers, significant by second grade, and almost fully developed by sixth grade”<sup>32</sup>.

Bagozzi and Washaw<sup>33</sup> take into consideration goals as another variable that plays an important role and that can give a contribution in the domain of consumer behavior. They start from Fishbein’s model of reasoned action and they adapt and expand it so that the resultant framework, called TT (*Theory of Trying*) encompasses goals in addition to reasoned behaviors. They use the term *goals* to refer to “those behaviors for which an individual *thinks* impediments stand in the way”<sup>34</sup>. The Fishbein model is, in their opinion, lacking in making provision for the intervening process: since all decisions to act are not effectively actualized and all efforts at trying are not successful, they elaborate a model to describe the process between decision making/intention formation and behavior/outcome attainment, in order to explain consumption in a better way.

One of the first scholars to recognize a social aspect in consumption was Veblen<sup>35</sup>. In his research, preferences are socially determined in relation to the positions of individual in the social hierarchy. These social norms are not static, but evolve over time following the evolution of economy and society. Veblen’s conception

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<sup>29</sup> Belk et al. 1982.

<sup>30</sup> Belk 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Belk et al 1982, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Belk et al. 1982, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990, p. 128.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Trigg 2001, p. 99.

of *conspicuous consumption* has been afterwards widely criticized because its lack of generality<sup>36</sup>, as consumers no longer display their wealth conspicuously but rather social status is conveyed in more sophisticated and subtle ways. Another objection to his approach lies in the fact that consumer behavior is no longer shaped by positions of social class but by lifestyles that cut across the social hierarchy<sup>37</sup>; however, according to Trigg, if not misrepresented, Verblen's theory as developed in a more general framework by Bourdieu, is still full of subtle and valuable insights.

Generally speaking, the world of consumption is constantly changing following the evolution of the society, as new and completely unimaginable possibilities are continuously emerging. In 1995, Firat and Venkatesh already reflected on the emergence of a *postmodern consumer* who attempts to restructure his/her identities in the face of overpowering market forces<sup>38</sup>, and the consequent need to rethink our conceptualizations of consumption and the consumer in the three areas of the philosophical system: the consumption system, the idea of subject/consumer and the signification system<sup>39</sup>.

A recent evolution in the research stream is represented by the update to the concept of *extended self* introduced in 1988<sup>40</sup> by Belk, who in 2013<sup>41</sup> tried to offer again a powerful way to look at our possessions: in the digital world, many of our belongings are dematerialized and this new technological environment has affected the way we consume, present ourselves and communicate. Five changes, occurred with digital consumption, are taken into consideration as impacting the nature of self and of possessions: dematerialization (updates on the concepts of attachment and singularization), reembodiment (updates on the concept of attachment to avatars, Proteus effect and multiplicity), sharing (updates on the concept of self-revelation, loss of control, shared digital possessions and aggregate self, and shared sense of cyber-space), co-construction of the self (updates on the concept of affirmation

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<sup>36</sup> It would apply only to luxury goods.

<sup>37</sup> See Trigg 2001, p. 99 and references.

<sup>38</sup> Fiat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255.

<sup>39</sup> Fiat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 257.

<sup>40</sup> Belk 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Belk 2013.

seeking and building an aggregate extended self), distributed memory (updates on the concepts of digital clutter and narratives of the self)<sup>42</sup>.

### **2.3 A focus on cultural aspects of consumption**

Shifting to another level of complexity, it has been previously noted that in recent years considering consumption as a culturally-bound activity, and so analyzing also the cultural relationships with the self, personality, and attitude, which are the basis of consumer behavior models, has seen an increased level of interest. It is worth showing more extensively the consequence of these considerations in the field of study of consumer behavior.

Dholakia and Firat, in their book "Consuming People: From Political Economy to Theatres of Consumption"<sup>43</sup>, originally published in 1998, start from the strong essential idea that the history of consumption is not independent from the structure of society and its institutions, but it actually evolves within them. Patterns of consumption are explored through a four dimensional framework consisting of social relationships (*individual and collective use*), availability (*private or public use*), participation (*participatory or alienated*) and activity (*active or passive consumption*). Their comprehensive analysis allows also to identify a trend towards individuation, private, alienated and passive consumption.

McCracken identifies the same strong link between culture and consumption, as consumption is driven, shaped, as well as constrained by cultural consideration. Culture is "the ideas and activities in with which we construe and construct our world", while consumption is the "process by which consumer goods and services are created, bought and used"<sup>44</sup>. Culture determinates "the coordinates of social action and productive activity, and the behaviors and objects that issue from both"<sup>45</sup>. In a consumer society, cultural meaning is not static, but moves from one location to another. It in three locations: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and

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<sup>42</sup> Belk 2013, pp. 479 ss.

<sup>43</sup> Dholakia and Firat 2003.

<sup>44</sup> McCracken 1990, p. xi.

<sup>45</sup> McCracken 1986, p. 72.

the individual consumer<sup>46</sup>. Advertising, the fashion system, and consumer rituals are the instruments responsible of the transfer of this meaning between these locations<sup>47</sup>. In a successive broader analysis he also shows a peculiar view that goes against the common belief that consumerism and materialism are destructive to society, because it is through this consumption that order in society is created and maintained<sup>48</sup>.

However, when taking culture into consideration, we should always remember that we are not talking about a homogeneous body of ideas, customs and social behavior, but about a peculiar expression of a particular society.

De Mooij and Hofstede<sup>49</sup> make a review of all cultural aspects of consumption for different kind of cultures<sup>50</sup>, such as motivation and emotions, cognitive processes, and consumer behavior domains, including in their research important implications for global branding and advertising. They inspire their conceptual framework to the same model of Manrai and Manrai<sup>51</sup> and structure the cultural components of the person in terms of consumer attributes and processes, and the cultural components of behavior in terms of consumer behavior domains. The attributes of the person refer to *what people are*, and the processes refer to *what moves people to consume*. How people think, perceive and what motivates them are viewed as processes<sup>52</sup>. Hofstede's<sup>53</sup> four dimensions of national culture model still remain valid in this context: Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Long-/Short-term Orientation are the variables used to describe cultures in terms of consumer behavior. For example in a large power distance culture, one's social status must be clear and global brands serve exactly that purpose<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> McCracken 1986, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> McCracken 1986, p. 71 and 81.

<sup>48</sup> McCracken 1990.

<sup>49</sup> de Mooij, Hofstede 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Described by using the famous Hofstede's model. See also Soares et al. 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Manrai, Manrai 1996.

<sup>52</sup> de Mooij, Hofstede 2011 p. 181.

<sup>53</sup> Hofstede 1991.

<sup>54</sup> de Mooij, Hofstede 2011 p. 182.

Ger and Belk explore materialism<sup>55</sup> in twelve countries, using qualitative data to measure desires and perceived necessities. Their results suggest that materialism, even if some consumption practices that have long been associated with Western society are more and more globally diffused<sup>56</sup>, cannot be successfully investigated across cultures by using conceptualizations that are tailored to the United States' cultural model, because it appears everything but uniform across countries with the same level of economic development<sup>57</sup>. De Mooij and Hofstede state this concept even more radically by noticing that “although for some durable products and new technologies, at macro level countries converge, it is the case that countries tend to diverge with respect to how people use these products. Over time consumption differences between countries are stable or they increase”<sup>58</sup>.

In this particular research it is assumed that consumption behaviors differ from culture to culture and consequently that the provision of social rules and its dynamic interaction with consumption is learned in a country-specific way. For this reason, the results of my findings are bound to the Italian context and cannot be generalized without previous verification.

## ***2.4 Consumer socialization***

Proceeding further on the analysis and narrowing the focus to come closer to the specific scope of this research, another important aspect that has been investigated is the one of consumer socialization. It is now evident that consumption is a complex activity that needs to be learned. Consumer socialization deals with *what* we need to learn about consumption and *how* we do or, on a normative level, we *should* do it. Ward defines consumer socialization as “processes by which young

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<sup>55</sup> Ger and Belk 1995, p. 55: “The consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking that is commonly labeled materialism...”.

<sup>56</sup> The authors suggest that Western consumer culture is spreading as a result of the influence of mass media, multinational marketing and tourism.

<sup>57</sup> Ger and Belk 1995, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> de Mooij and Hofstede 2002, p. 67.

people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace”<sup>59</sup>.

The following scheme is mainly based on the comprehensive works of Roedder John and Ward, and accepts the synthesis and simplification developed by Ginman and Lundquist in their master thesis<sup>60</sup>. Ward concentrates on the three key areas of consumer socialization processes, content of learning and permanence of early learning<sup>61</sup>; while Roedder John puts her focus on the developmental sequence characterizing the growth of consumer knowledge, skills, and values as children mature throughout childhood and adolescence. She presents a conceptual framework for understanding consumer socialization as a series of stages<sup>62</sup>, an extremely precious schematization for the purpose of this study. Even if in the following section the focus will be on the two types of knowledge needed to become a consumer, rather than the consumer’s progression through different age ranges, it is always worth keeping in mind that consumer socialization is a developmental process, which involves both cognitive and social development.

#### ***2.4.1 Consumption skills, knowledge and attitudes***

Following the previously mentioned analysis we can list three types of elements that people need to learn about consumption: *skills, knowledge, and attitudes*. Combining the approaches coming from Roedder John and Ward, we can group all the above into two categories and then analyze them in depth<sup>63</sup>:

1. Structural or directly relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes;
2. Symbolic or indirectly relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Ward 1974, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Roedder John 1999; Ward 1974; Ginman and Lundquist 2014 pp. 9-11.

<sup>61</sup> Ward 1974.

<sup>62</sup> Transitions between stages occurs as children grow older and mature in cognitive and social terms.

<sup>63</sup> After a deep reading of the two papers, I decided to follow the simplification proposed by Ginman and Lundquist in their master thesis that is the initial step of this same research. That is because I agree on their purpose of shedding light on two very different ideas of consumer learning, instead of concentrating in giving exact definitions.

<sup>64</sup> See the table in Roedder John 1999, p. 186: the knowledge in the two categories is progressing through different stages defined as “perceptual stage” (3-7 years old), “analytical stage” (7-11 years

## **Structural or directly relevant**

The definition of structural or directly relevant refers to “basic” skills that people need to learn in order to be able to interact with the marketplace and enact their role as consumers<sup>65</sup>. Ward defines them as those skills consumers need in order to be able to go through with the act of consumption, as for example knowledge about product or brands<sup>66</sup>. Similarly, Roedder John considers structural skills and knowledge as the type of knowledge about products and brand that allows a consumer to distinguish between products and group them into categories<sup>67</sup>.

## **Symbolic or indirectly relevant**

Symbolic or indirectly relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes are related to the “understanding of the symbolic meaning and status accorded to certain type of products and brand names”<sup>68</sup> and this type of socialization includes the “learning and adoption of motives and values pertaining to consumption activities”<sup>69</sup>; following Ward, these skills “motivate purchases, but are not directly useful in purchase decision or transaction itself”<sup>70</sup>. This knowledge includes, for example, expressing strong preferences for some brand names over others, often basely on a relatively sophisticated understanding of their brand concepts and images<sup>71</sup>, orientation towards conspicuous consumption, materialism and non-rational impulse-oriented

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old), and reflective stage (11-16 years). As underlined in a following section, for the purpose of this research has been decided to concentrate on children in the first two developmental stages, considering books for children from 5 to 11 years old.

<sup>65</sup> Ginman and Lunquist 2014, p. 9 include in this category for example: the ability to distinguish between commercial and non-commercial space; economic motivations for consumption; decision-making skills and abilities (such as the ability to seek out information about products and to evaluate and compare their attributes, adjust someone’s information search to the costs and benefits of gathering information); advertising knowledge; the ability to manage finances and understanding pricing; knowledge about the sequence of shopping (included communication skills for interacting with shop staff and skills for influencing and negotiation); transaction knowledge; understanding how to use products; brand and products categorization. Moschis and Churchill 1978; Roedder John 1999; Martens 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Ward 1974.

<sup>67</sup> Roedder John 1999.

<sup>68</sup> Roedder John 1999, p. 193.

<sup>69</sup> Roedder John 1999, p. 201.

<sup>70</sup> Ward 1974, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Achenreiner 1995 as cited by Roedder John 1999.

consumption<sup>72</sup>, behaviors that are clearly influenced by social motivation, such as peer approval<sup>73</sup>.

## ***2.5 Stories as a way of learning***<sup>74</sup>

After having reviewed the literature about consumption and learning how to consume, it is time to get closer to the topic of the present research, that is the contribution of children books to their socialization as consumers. To generalize, the problem consists in how stories can contribute to their learning related specifically to consumption practices.

Once again we need to start from a definition. Looking for the definition of 'story' in the Oxford Dictionary, the word is not singularly defined. A story can be:

- an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment;
- a report of an item of news in a newspaper, magazine, or broadcast;
- an account of past events in someone's life or in the development of something<sup>75</sup>.

As we will see stories exist in many genres and forms, with different purposes and can be delivered in many different ways. Generalizing from the definition, we can define stories as "the sequencing of temporally successive events, real or imaginary"<sup>76</sup>, which enter our world through various mediums, such as writing, theatre and storytelling<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Roedder John 1999, p. 201.

<sup>73</sup> As pointed out as Roedder John, on a normative level, social motivations are often viewed as undesirable, with economic motivations typically viewed as more desirable socialization outcomes.

<sup>74</sup> A comprehensive discussion on the other socialization agents can be found in Ginman and Lundquist 2014, pp. 12-13. The list of agents include family, peer group, work group, law, church, school, mass media.

<sup>75</sup> Oxford Dictionary Online: 'story'.

<sup>76</sup> McCabe and Peterson 1991, p. ix.

<sup>77</sup> Barthes and Duisit 1975.

### **2.5.1 Narrative transportation and narrative persuasion**

Since it would be impossible to make a comprehensive review of the vast amount of existing literature on the theory and structure of stories, or in other words how they come to an existence and why and through which medium they are delivered, the focus will be on the effects and psychological impact of stories on the receivers. Of fundamental importance in this field are the theories of narrative transportation and narrative persuasion, at the moment also popular in the domain of marketing following the increasing diffusion of the concept of brand storytelling.

#### **Narrative transportation**

The concept of *narrative transportation* has been elaborated for the first time by Gerrig<sup>78</sup>, who describes it as an active process characterized by the presence of *participatory responses* (thoughts actually generated in response to the narrative). These have been easily explained by Green and Brock as a “distinct mental process an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings<sup>79</sup>: we can experience this kind of sensation, suspense included, even if we know beforehand the outcome of a story.

The process of narrative transportation allows the reader to adopt the assumptions of the story as a frame of reference, suspending prior, real-world assumptions in the process and therefore losing touch with aspects of the world of origin<sup>80</sup>; during this convergent process, all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narratives<sup>81</sup>. Transportation is different from involvement in that the person feels caught up in the story itself and not in any consequences extrinsic to the narrative<sup>82</sup>. This loss of access to some real-world facts, may occur on a physical level or on a psychological level, that is “subjective

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<sup>78</sup> Gerrig 1993. This study is developed with an approach that integrates cognitive psychology, linguistic pragmatics, literary theory and psycholinguistics and comprehensively describes all the cognitive processes bound up with the experience of narrative worlds.

<sup>79</sup> Green and Brock 2000, p. 701.

<sup>80</sup> Green et al 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Wang and Calder 2006, p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> Wang and Calder 2006, p. 152.

distancing from reality”<sup>83</sup>. As a consequence, information from narratives can affect preexisting knowledge and beliefs and leave the receiver much changed at the end.

Gerrig’s uses the analogy of travel to explain narrative transportation: narrative is the means of transportation used to travel a distance from the place of origin of the story receiver. The distance travelled depends on the degree of realism that the narrative contains, which determines the degree of transportation (in other words, the extent of absorption into the narrative flow of the story as it unfolds) and on how further the story is from the real world of the traveller. At his destination, if narrative transportation occurs, the traveller assumes the corresponding set of beliefs and values needed to make sense of an otherwise unfamiliar place<sup>84</sup>.

Green and Brock, who develop also a “transportation scale”, state very clearly that transportation does not only include enhanced enjoyment, but ultimately self-transformation of the story receiver. The two consequence of narrative transportation are an *affective response*, such as identification with and empathy for the narrative characters, as well as a *cognitive response*, such as the assessment of themes and actions embedded in the story.

Stories, through the process of narrative transportation, seem therefore a really effective means to convey especially symbolic skills, knowledge and attitudes related to consumption; transportation and corresponding beliefs are demonstrated also to be generally unaffected by labeling a story as fact or fiction<sup>85</sup>. The relationship between the likelihood of transportation and the particular medium chosen to convey the story is yet to be investigated<sup>86</sup>. Green et al. suggest that books have an advantage as they allow the reader to progress at a self-chosen pace as well as pass again through sections of the text. Books also require greater imaginative investment

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<sup>83</sup> Green and Brock 2000, p. 702.

<sup>84</sup> Gerrig 1993, pp. 10-11: “Someone (“the traveler”) is transported, by some means of transportation, as a result of performing certain actions. The traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The travel returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey”.

<sup>85</sup> Green and Brock 2000. This outcome is particularly relevant for the present study, because in the book sample fictional books are analyzed next to non-fictional ones.

<sup>86</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014 came to this conclusion that remains valid till the date of the present research. Other promising fields to be further investigated are the boundary conditions under which fiction can influence and the factors that determine the staying power of that influence.

from the reader, highly experienced transportation, which could impact the probability of a positive belief-change<sup>87</sup>.

## **Narrative persuasion**

*Narrative persuasion* refers more to the outcome of a process of narrative transportation, to the altered world-beliefs as a result of exposure to a narrative<sup>88</sup>. As stated before, readers who are highly transported by a narrative may return transformed<sup>89</sup>.

To understand the concept of narrative persuasion, it is helpful to distinguish it from *analytical persuasion*, which occurs through cognitive elaboration instead of narrative persuasion<sup>90</sup>, and requires the recipient of a narrative to be able and motivated to elaborate on the content of a message<sup>91</sup>. Analytical persuasion takes place through the dual-process models of persuasion, which suggest that it can occur through either systematic processing or heuristic processing, depending on the degree of cognitive attention given to the content of the message. The two models that have dominated persuasion research are the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) for systematic processing and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) for heuristic processing.

The first model, ELM, refers to situations in which the message recipient experiences a high level of systematic cognitive elaboration, when arguments of a message are carefully considered and weighted against each other; on the other side, HSM model is useful to explain situations of low cognitive elaboration, when the message recipient will use heuristics and shallow cues as a basis for processing information<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Green et al. 2004; Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 15.

<sup>88</sup> Green and Brock 2000.

<sup>89</sup> Green and Brock 2000; Green 2004; Van Laer et al. 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Green and Brock 2000.

<sup>91</sup> Appel and Richter 2007. Most of the book that will be analyzed in the present research can be labeled as fictional, except for one of them that is more a manual than a fictional story. However, also that book uses fictional narratives to increase the effectiveness of the provide information.

<sup>92</sup> Green and Brock 2000.

The dual-process of analytical persuasion has been considered not to be sufficiently adequate to explain in a comprehensive way the attitudinal, emotional and cognitive responses that take place during the reception of a narrative. Green and Brock seek to establish a model of narrative persuasion that could better explain the phenomenon, known as the Transportation-Imagery Model. Van Laer et al. in 2014 developed an extension of such model, which they refer to as the Extended Transportation-Imagery Model, that provides a comprehensive model which includes both the antecedents and consequences of narrative transportation, and adopts a multidisciplinary framework including cognitive psychology and consumer culture theory findings<sup>93</sup>. The first extension consists in the identification of three main storyteller antecedents (identifiable characters, imaginable plot, verisimilitude) and four story-receiver antecedents (familiarity, attention, transportability, and demographic antecedents, such as sex and education), which are expected to affect the likelihood of transportation, and the degree and nature of a story's impact on the receiver. On the side of consequences, five potential kinds of effects on receivers are demonstrated<sup>94</sup>:

1. affective response;
2. cognitive response (critical thought and narrative thoughts);
3. belief (the more transported are the receivers, the more they disconnect from existing beliefs)<sup>95</sup>;
4. attitude (desirability and truthfulness);
5. intention (willingness to perform an action).

It is worth noticing that could be extremely difficult to assess whether narrative transportation has the same effects on children, or whether the conditions for the likelihood of narrative transportation occurring are met in the sample of books studied, particularly heterogeneous in the tones and purposes of the narratives. The antecedents, and their relative importance may be different and not well defined for children; following Diekmann and Murnen, children are expected to have a lower threshold for narrative persuasion than adults, as they cannot easily differentiate

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<sup>93</sup> Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Van Laer et al. 2014, p. 804.

<sup>95</sup> Green 2004; Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014.

reality from fiction and thus do not necessarily identify real-world limitations of stories, nor are they able to fully critically evaluate information<sup>96</sup>.

To elaborate more on the effects of fictional narratives, Appel and Richter, in a paper published in 2007, gave an important contribution to the understanding of their effects, distinguished from the ones provided by other kinds of texts. Fictional texts are defined as the ones that “do not claim to provide readers with detailed knowledge about the world”<sup>97</sup> but at the same time “contain a lot of information that may be applied to the real world”<sup>98</sup>. They showed how the pervasive effects of fictional narratives, not only have short-term effects<sup>99</sup>, but are also persistent and even increase over time<sup>100</sup>, and how beliefs acquired by reading fictional narratives are integrated into real-world knowledge<sup>101</sup>. In this way, persuasion through fiction appears as distinct from persuasion obtained with rhetoric texts, whose pervasive effects have shown to decline over time<sup>102</sup>. It is therefore demonstrated that the fictional narrative represents a powerful mean of altering our view of the world, through the experiential state that Gerrig calls *transportation*<sup>103</sup>.

To conclude, theories and case studies on narrative transportation ground the relevance of a work on children books, since they have demonstrated that stories can transport and powerfully persuade people (children included), about what is appropriate and desirable and can leave them effectively changed after passing through these kind of processes.

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<sup>96</sup> Diekman and Murnen 2004.

<sup>97</sup> Appel and Richter 2007, p. 114.

<sup>98</sup> Appel and Richter 2007, p. 114 here citing Eco 1994.

<sup>99</sup> As shown by Green, Garst and Brock 2004. They also discuss the available evidence concerning belief change through fiction, that is connected exclusively with short-term pervasive effects.

<sup>100</sup> This is what they call *absolute sleeper effect*.

<sup>101</sup> Appel and Richter 2007, p. 113.

<sup>102</sup> Appel and Richter 2007, p. 118.

<sup>103</sup> Gerrig 1993: if readers experience this kind of *transportation*, the fictional world of the narrative partly replaces the real world while they are reading and this mental journey affects emotional as well as cognitive processes; in this context, the acceptance of beliefs takes place involuntary and it is completely independent of critical elaboration.

### 3. The research method

The aim of this section is to explain the research approach, including the methodology, the tools created to analyze data, sampling methods and dataset. The present method is similar to the one applied by Ginman and Lunquist<sup>104</sup>, with some adjustments due to the differences in the nature of the book analyzed and the limitations given by the fact that this project was conducted alone rather than with a research partner.

The approach is once again an exploratory one, which consisted in collecting qualitative data and, without a specific hypothesis in mind, trying to draw some conclusions and to identify some patterns and trends from the available material. The only background to the analysis was the amount of knowledge on the topic of consumption behavior, consumer socialization, and narrative transportation and persuasion.

Ginman and Lundquist already grounded their sampling decision on Roedder's findings<sup>105</sup> about children belonging to the age segment 8 years old and younger, defined under the tag "limited processors". In her research, the scholar is calling for greater scrutiny and regulation of advertising messages directed to children at that age: that is because the processing of peripheral message, typical of that stage of development, may interfere with the intentional message and convey questionable social norms and beliefs. Similarly, Weitzman et al. argue that children are especially impressionable during their preschool years (under the age of 7)<sup>106</sup>. It seems therefore obvious that stories can also influence children the most if received at that age.

It was decided to broaden a little bit the age range, including in the sample also books addressed to children up to 11 years, for two main reasons. First of all because, in the words of Roedder John, enormous changes take place, both cognitively and socially, as children move into the analytical stage (ages 7–11), so it

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<sup>104</sup> Ginman and Lunquist 2014, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Ginman and Lunquist 2014, p. 18; Roedder 1981.

<sup>106</sup> Weitzman et al. 1972.

has been reputed interesting to include this phase as a whole; at this stage in fact some of the most important developments in terms of consumer knowledge and skills take place. The shift from perceptual to more symbolic thought noted by Piaget<sup>107</sup>, along with a dramatic increase in information processing abilities, results at that stage in a more sophisticated understanding of the marketplace, a more complex set of knowledge about concepts such as advertising and brands, and a new perspective that goes beyond their own feelings and motives. The ability to analyze stimuli on multiple dimensions and the acknowledgment of contingencies bring about vast changes in children's consumer decision-making skills and strategies<sup>108</sup>. Secondly, a more practical reason has been to make the sample a bit more relevant and "sophisticated", starting from the presumption that within books target to older children would have been easier to find a more complex representation of consumption activities.

### **3.1 Sampling**

The following analysis is conducted on six books in Italian, some of which have been originally written in this language, while others have been translated from English or Spanish<sup>109</sup>.

Starting from the assumption that the relevance of a book in influencing children socialization about consumption activities can be approximated by popularity, the books were selected applying the following method.

- On Amazon (Italian website), using the tool advanced research, children books were selected and setting the age range from 5 to 11<sup>110</sup>. It is worth mentioning that at this stage has not been possible to identify the exact

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<sup>107</sup> Piaget 1962.

<sup>108</sup> Roedder John 1999, p. 187.

<sup>109</sup> Originally written in Italian: *Inseguimento a New York; Cyberbulli al tappeto*. Translated from English or Spanish: *La scatola dei desideri; Diario di una schiappa. Portatemi a casa!; Frida Kahlo; Dov'è Wally?*

<sup>110</sup> It is worth mentioning that age range are grouped differently in different versions on Amazon website, even if I do not have an explanation for that.

method that has been used on the website to group books per age. There is therefore a degree of subjectivity applied to the choice.

- The results were arranged by “popularity”<sup>111</sup>. For the same reason as before, some limitations need to be applied to the concept of popularity, because Amazon does not state clearly how this popularity is calculated<sup>112</sup>.
- The results were further narrowed by selecting the 3 most popular books in the categories “Avventura”<sup>113</sup> and “Famiglia, problemi personali e sociali”<sup>114</sup>.
- It was decided to include in the selection only one book per author (for example, in the popularity rank appeared more than one book from the series “Diario di una schiappa”, but only the most popular one, “Diario di una schiappa. Portatemi a casa!”<sup>115</sup>, have been selected)<sup>115</sup>.

It is also necessary to mention in this section that, by choosing to follow Amazon’s popularity ranking, a simplification was operated. In fact, there were not many reliable options to choose from and to use as cross-references for popularity of the books. General selling data about children’s books from trustworthy sources seems to be not available to the public, except from individual publishers’ rankings<sup>116</sup>.

Finally, it is useful to summarize some limitations due to the subjectivity applied on some of the elements of the analysis. As stated before, the notion of “popularity” is based on subjective judgment, as well as the age grouping of books. Moreover, going to the heart of the matter, even if the same books were read through more than once, allowing some time to pass between reads in order not to miss some information or relevant clues, the identification of consumer activities, the judgment on their relevance and, to some extent, the generalization, has been done

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<sup>111</sup> This popularity rank is the one on April 24th 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Even with an accurate research on the web has not been possible to gather information on the formulation of the popularity rank.

<sup>113</sup> Adventure.

<sup>114</sup> Family, personal and social problems.

<sup>115</sup> The book *Girl R-Evolution*, has been read but excluded from the analysis, because reading it revealed that was not suitable for the scope of the research. I considered that in the book consumption activities were too biased because of the declared educative purpose; I also decided to exclude it in favor of books where facts and fiction share the same page space.

<sup>116</sup> From a rapid exploration of this kind of rankings, all selected books occupy places among the best sellers, and it can be pointed out also that selling data does not necessarily represent an adequate proxy for books’ popularity.

on the basis of personal judgment and previous experience in compiling such kind of research work.

### **3.2 Methodology**

As stated before, the method use for this exploratory research project is a purely qualitative one. This is because of the nature of the project itself and the nature of data that can be collected from children's books. The analysis of how consumption and consumption norms are portrayed in books is really difficult to quantify, for many different reasons: a sample of six books cannot be considered comprehensive and sufficient to explain the phenomenon<sup>117</sup>, the nature and purpose of the books themselves do not make them completely homogeneous, some of the content subject to the analysis will be lost by using only a quantitative approach.

However, to ensure the relevance of the research project, a strictly rigorous sequential method was applied to the study of the books.

The preliminary phase have been devoted to a first reading of all books, without concentrating too much on consumption activities, but to get a general idea of the content and the message of the book. A grid has been created to summarize the most important variables of the books<sup>118</sup>.

A second phase consisted in the factual aspects collection. All the books were read again with the explicit purpose of collecting all relevant data related to consumption activities, which were recorded in an analysis grid<sup>119</sup>.

Finally, I identified the relevant themes and the respective codes. The criteria applied to select the activities have been their relative importance in the book, their significant normative impact and their presence in more than one book.

The last step have been to go through all the activities again and compile the last column of the analysis grid with the final assigned code<sup>120</sup>. Based on this final

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<sup>117</sup> For information about the choice of the books see paragraph 3.1 *Sampling*.

<sup>118</sup> See Appendix A – Book summary grid.

<sup>119</sup> See Appendix B – Book analysis and coding grid.

codification grid, it has been possible to complete the findings, to identify similarities and differences across books and also to make some comparisons with other previous research results.

A notice should be made at this point on the importance not only of the text in the books but also of the visual elements, either reinforcing the descriptions made in the text or conveying a message on their own. Every single book in the sample, except from one<sup>121</sup>, has a rich apparatus of images and one of them consist mostly of visual representations of activities<sup>122</sup>: these images complement the verbal content, reinforce some messages, offer a counterpoint or an alternative viewpoint. Fang, in a paper published in 1996, confirms the essential function of illustrations, that hold a prominent place in children's literature and carry out multiple functions: establishing settings, defining and developing characters, extending or developing plot, providing a different viewpoint, contributing to textual coherence and reinforcing text<sup>123</sup>.

### **3.3 Tools**

The main tools used for this research are grids built using Excel:

- Book Summary grid
- Book analysis and codification grid

The first grid, as the name states, consists in a simple summary of main facts and variables of the six books analyzed. Each book has a corresponding row, while in the columns are placed the different variables: title, original title, author, author's country of origin, gender of the author, name and gender of the illustrator (if relevant), translator (if the book has been translated), year of first publication of the book, publisher, country of first publication, presence of visuals, nature of visuals (color or black and white), number of pages.

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<sup>120</sup> See Appendix B – Book analysis and coding grid.

<sup>121</sup> *La scatola dei desideri*.

<sup>122</sup> *Dov'è Wally?*

<sup>123</sup> Fang 1996.

The second grid, named book analysis, is used to collect all the data related to consumption activities in the books. Again, each row corresponds to a book and the variables in the columns are now: page(s) of the book in which the consumption activity(/ies)/event(s) takes place, whether the activity is described through text or visuals, quotation (if relevant)<sup>124</sup>, comment analysis or proposed theme/code, final selected theme and code. Concerning consumption events or activities, the aim was to consider every possible consumption activity, at any stage of the consumption circle, undertaken by one of the characters in the book or a consumption activity described by a character or the author (not necessarily relevant to the plot). Some of the notes are not strictly connected to consumption activities, but rather to representations of the marketplace or the decision-making process leading to the consumption behavior, and feelings and emotions related to consumption activities<sup>125</sup>. The codification column was modified once the final themes and codes had been selected and the final codes have been assigned.

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<sup>124</sup> Since the books are in Italian, all the quotations are in Italian, but their content have been made clear by the description of the consumption activity or the comment next to the quote.

<sup>125</sup> As the book "Cyberbulli al tappeto" is structured more as a manual than a fictional story, there can be consumption activities related to it that are described in a more systematic and abstract way and not necessarily performed by a character.

## 4. Findings

The following section will be focused on presenting the findings in the six books analyzed. On the basis of the registered consumption activities, four macro themes with the respective codes were identified.

They do not exhaust all the themes and codes that appear in the considered portion of children literature, but they have proved to be the most recurrent and relevant in order to answer the research questions. During the process, some elements were excluded on the basis that they did not provide enough pertinent material to the discussion or that their analysis risked being out of topic, although they still have been kept in mind when discussing some of the final considerations. A complete account of consumption activities can be found in the book analysis and coding grid<sup>126</sup>.

Most of the excluded activities are related to consumption for functional purposes, therefore apparently less interesting from a research perspective.

### ***4.1 A note on the book sample***

Before starting the discussion on the themes and codes identified, it is relevant to describe the nature and tone of the books studied and how this can affect the quality of the available data. This brief section needs to be taken as a sort of disclaimer and a note on the limitations of the research.

Some of the analyzed books are in Italian and some are translated from another language<sup>127</sup>. They are conspicuously varied in terms of age target, tone and language, verisimilitude of the story (totally fictional, realistic, based on real facts), purpose and prominence of visual elements.

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<sup>126</sup> See Appendix B – Book analysis and codification grid.

<sup>127</sup> See Appendix A – Book summary grid.

“Dov’è Wally? Il viaggio fantastico”<sup>128</sup>, for example, is a book composed mostly of visuals, where the individuation of consumption activities consisted in an “indirect” identification of consumption events inside intricate images, without almost any clue coming from verbal descriptions<sup>129</sup>. Even if the relevance of visual elements in children’s literature has been underlined<sup>130</sup>, it is possible to assume that the role of images in this case goes beyond a simple “complement” or “counterpoint” for the text. Young children love to play hide-'n-seek and to look for hidden objects in pictures<sup>131</sup>, so it can be imagined that the enjoyment that they can obtain from this “visual reading” could lead to the same narrative transportation<sup>132</sup>.

Completely different considerations can be drawn with regards to Benedetti and Morosinotto’s “Cyberbulli al tappeto”<sup>133</sup>: this book is conceived as a sort of manual and is a pedagogic book that instills and suggests desirable behaviors. Its normative purpose affects the way consumption activities are portrayed: they are represented more comprehensively and in a mediated way, sometimes also marking the moral and ethical implications of some actions<sup>134</sup>.

“Frida Kahlo per bambini e bambine” deserves a different kind of reflection. The book is based on the biography of Frida Kahlo and, as a consequence, some themes and events are conditioned by verisimilitude. Some of the represented behaviors belong to a different historical period and come from a different social and cultural background, even if the series’ title, “the anti-princess”, suggests that the aim of the book is promoting universally relevant values.

“La scatola dei desideri”<sup>135</sup> is the most complex book in the set, both in terms of plot and characters. It is targeted to children older than 9, able to understand and detect more sophisticated situations. A huge amount of consumption activities is

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<sup>128</sup> *Where is Wally? The fantastic journey.*

<sup>129</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>130</sup> See par. 3.2 p. 29.

<sup>131</sup> Fang 1996, p. 137.

<sup>132</sup> A further reflection could be made on the different “rythm” required to interpret these kind of intricated images.

<sup>133</sup> *Cyberbully knocked out.*

<sup>134</sup> This is valid not only for consumption activities, but for all actions performed by the book characters or described by the authors.

<sup>135</sup> *Jeremy Fink and The Meaning of Life.*

therefore included in the book, most of the time conveying more than one meaning and suggesting different implications on more than one dimension.

In general, in “Diario di una schiappa. Portatemi a casa!”, “Inseguimento a New York” and “La scatola dei desideri” consumption activities are portrayed in a more natural and realistic way, and sometimes are even taken to a more sophisticated level by the use of humor, paradoxical situations and characters. The level of complexity of these books is high, because a lot of different settings and situations are involved; there are also temporal and geographical shifts, and a lot of characters also portray really different approaches to consumption activities.

Therefore, the effort of comparing the books and drawing some generalizations has been somewhat hindered by the lack of homogeneity of the sample. As a consequence, it is evident that for the identification of relevant themes and codes, it has been necessary to somewhat force some similarities and make simplifications: when a consumption activity has been identified to have more than a single implication, it was usually reported in relation to the most relevant theme and code of which it constituted an example.

#### ***4.2 Theme 1 – Extended role of consumption***

This first theme, identified also by Ginman and Lundquist<sup>136</sup> is broadly present in this research's the book sample. Under the definition “extended role”, are included all the ways beyond pure functionality in which consumption can be used. The most prominent representations are consumption for creating identity and define others, consumption for reinforcing social ties, and, last code, consumption with symbolic and metaphoric meanings.

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<sup>136</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014.

#### **4.2.1 Code 1.1 - Consumption for creating identities and defining others**

This implication of consumption activities has been found to be one of the most prominent in all the books in the sample. Independently from the verisimilitude of the context, characters are identified and typified by referring to what they wear or do, and sometimes this leads to an immediate judgment.

This wide occurrence of both subjective and objective identification of characters through consumption seems to be consistent with Belk's idea of consumption as an extension of the self: we are what we consume and conversely, what we consume is what we are<sup>137</sup>.

#### **Describing and identifying characters in terms of consumption**

In each book, the vast majority of characters is described in terms of their consumption behaviors and objects. This is most of the time done through what they are wearing, which sometimes is related to social norms and stereotypical representations of gender, and also commonly through what they are eating or like to eat. It is unavoidable for the characters to wear something in the illustrations, but the surprising aspect is that this same identification mechanism is put in place also in "La scatola dei desideri", targeted to older children and where the presence of visuals is rare.

The most evident example is at the very beginning of this same book. In the first page, when we do not know anything yet about Jeremy, one of the two protagonists, he is described in terms of his eating habits. He is portrayed as always eating sandwiches with peanut butter and having really peculiar tastes in terms of food (p. 5). After a few pages we get to know a bit more about him by taking a look at the content of his backpack, where he keeps a lot of assorted objects that are explicitly said to be an extension of himself, and are associated with him throughout the entire story. The same is true for his mother, that is almost never described by considering her attitudes, but always by describing her own buying and consumption

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<sup>137</sup> Belk 1988 and 2013.

habits: at pp. 13-14 for example, it is extensively mentioned that she buys online only food and clothing for Jeremy (who insists in wearing only new items), while she purchases all the other goods at secondhand shops, even if she could afford to buy new ones.

Even without familiarity with Geronimo Stilton's saga, the illustration at the beginning of the book, says all we need to know about him: he is well dressed behind a desk, surrounded by a laptop, two pens, a cup of coffee (or tea) and a phone (p. 8)<sup>138</sup>.

Not only single characters, but also the outside world is often defined in terms of consumption goods or "opportunities to consume". In "La scatola dei desideri", Jeremy states that he does not need to go beyond his district because his needs have more to do with a physical proximity to shops and services (p. 21). When Geronimo visits New York City, the different areas of the metropolis are typified by the presence of bars, restaurants and shops lined along the streets (pp. 90-91): consumption is pervasive.

It is interesting to note that there can also be potential negative implications in judging people for their appearance. As well as in Ginman and Lundquist<sup>139</sup>, the most evident negative implication is in a book from the series "Diario di una schiappa". There is a family that acts as a sort of antagonist counterpart of Greg's family along all the adventure: its members are shown as fat, ugly looking and poorly dressed<sup>140</sup>. Another potential negative judgment can be inferred in the description of a neighbor in "La scatola dei desideri": he is described as wearing yellow because it is Friday and therefore marked as a fool. In this case, however, the negative implication is more in the nonsensical relationship between the day of the week and wearing yellow, and it is suddenly mitigated by the observation that Jeremy's mother likes to live there because of the presence of these weird people. The same mechanism is in place in the description of a man eating a sandwich full of garlic inside an underground train (p. 104): the immediate judgment is negative, but it almost suddenly changes when the man helps the two protagonists.

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<sup>138</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>139</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 34.

<sup>140</sup> See Appendix D.

The general impression is that the identification of characters through their material possessions and consumption habits is both a narrative expedient to stimulate intuition skills and an indicator of the importance placed on the role of consuming in shaping identities. Some of the authors seem fortunately aware of the intrinsic risk lying in offering children examples of superficial judgment of others, in that it is often mitigated by the presence of other positive elements contradicting the first negative impression.

### **Shaping identities through consumption**

Beyond the simple identification of characters by means of what they wear and consume, some consumption habits seem to play the role of reinforcing and shaping their identities.

This can be the case of the star in “Inseguimento a New York” who moves around the city in a limousine, walks on a red carpet and puts a lot of effort in being sure to be perfectly dressed (pp. 66-67). The same can be inferred for a collectivity: in contrast with Geronimo, who does not share the same habits, New York City people are portrayed as affirming their identity as New Yorkers by going ice-skating at Rockefeller Center and dressing all the same way (p. 68), visiting museums (p. 73), and going jogging in Central Park (p. 86).

The fact that consumption habits influence the way one can be perceived by others, even after a long-time acquaintance, is evident in “Cyberbulli al tappeto”, where there is an example of a guy that is excluded from the social group of his classmates because of the peculiar way he brushes his hair (p. 43). There are several examples of the perception shift due to changes in clothing and style in “La scatola dei desideri”. Jeremy and Lizzy have known each other for almost all of their lives, but Jeremy’s perception of Lizzy as his best friend changes completely when he sees her dressed “like a girl”, without a ponytail and wearing makeup (p. 94). At the same stage of the adventure, Lizzy forces Jeremy to dress elegantly because they need to visit a prestigious building which hosts a law firm and they need to look respectable to be allowed the entrance (p. 95). Again, in the same book, Lizzy is worried when she first meets the new neighbors because she does not feel dressed

appropriately and she knows that the others' first impression may be dependent on her physical appearance (p. 98).

Consumer goods are also used to "modify" physical appearance of the characters by helping them hiding their imperfections: this is the case of man's pants and the long skirt in "Frida Kahlo" (pp. 8, 26), and of patches and makeup for Lizzy in "La scatola dei desideri".

More than that, sometimes consumer goods are seen as part of a person, up to a point that, even if they are completely useless, individuals do not have the courage to get rid of them because they are too scared by the possible loss. The most evident example is given by the boat in "Diario di una schiappa": the father bought it and then realized that maintaining it would have been too costly, but he is not able to part from it and keeps it in the garden as a deposit of objects (p. 11). In "La scatola dei desideri", Jeremy's mother is not able to get rid of a sofa because they gave it a name and then started considering it as part of their family (p. 27).

This leads to another aspect that is often represented in the books: the meaning attached to objects goes far beyond their function, which in turn affects people's behavior in their regards. For example, Jeremy does not want to break his father's box because it represents a sort of personification of the father himself.

This is an example of a special meaning attached to an object because of affective reasons, but there are many other ways through which an object can acquire a particular meaning. The acquisition of meaning can be a consequence of a relationship with an achievement or an experience (this is the case of Geronimo Stilton's luggage at p. 26 that has accompanied him in many travels all over the world), it can be because the object has been given as a gift, because of age, exclusivity and rarity (for example, the lamp that is offered to Jeremy and Lizzy by Simon Rudolph at p. 203).

### **Customization, personalization, curation**

A variation on the same theme of attaching a particular meaning to objects is the frequent representation of the phenomenon of collecting, especially in "La stanza

dei desideri". Almost every character in the book possesses his/her collection of objects that is an expression of his/her personality: Jeremy collects "mutant candies" (p. 7), Lizzy collects cards she finds in the street (p. 45) and Jeremy's father used to do the same with many different objects (p. 46), the pieces of furniture decorating Jeremy's house are personalized by his mother to the point that they are more similar to pieces of art than to simple pieces of furniture (p. 18). This personalization of objects can also have practical reason: this is the case of Geronimo adding a blue tag on his yellow luggage in order to make easier to recognize it among the other baggage (p. 26).

A particular meaning is thus given to objects through curation, the act of selecting and arranging them in a original way which is seen to be an expression of personality.

### **Partial conclusions**

The relationship between consumption and identity is undeniably distinguishable in all of the books analyzed in the sample, and the readers are made clearly aware of this kind of association. This manifests itself in many different ways. First of all, the fact that characters are effectively identified by means of their favorite goods and their consumption habits conveys the meaning that it is almost automatic to draw inferences on people based on their consumption. Secondly, the characters appear aware that it is possible to build one's identity through consumption and also that the collection, selection and organization of objects can be a way to express their individuality. As a third consideration, since a special meaning can be attached to goods through various mechanisms, readers can learn that monetary considerations are not the only driver in deciding whether to keep or throw something away and that the true evaluation of goods is partially a subjective process.

#### ***4.2.2 Code 1.2 - Consumption for creating and reinforcing social ties***

A very common code, present in almost all the books, is that the display of consumption activities can be used to conform to others or to fit in one particular

group or to create, reinforce or modify a social bond. Most of the times, in fact, the purpose is not to feel part of the society as a whole, but rather to express the association to a smaller sub-group like a group of friends or family. Once this identity has been set up and shaped, there are also several consumption activities which aim to strengthen or modify these ties between individuals.

An unsolved issue in Ginman and Lundquist's sample is the difficulty in identifying the direction of the causal relation between a social relationship and consumption<sup>141</sup>: it is not clear whether consumption is used as a means to activate and shape social ties or vice versa. Even if the present sample is not wide, it can be stated that in the available books consumption is almost always presented as a way to express or reinforce an already existent relationship and it is never used to create it from scratch. The only ambiguity is in "La scatola dei desideri", when Jeremy wonders if Mr Oswald is trying to conquer their trust and affection by giving them food (p. 175). It can be affirmed that, in this case as well, the relationship already exists because it is somewhat "ratified" by the fact that the characters are doing civic duties: Mr Oswald's behavior has the only purpose of transform this contractual relationship in an affective one.

It is pretty evident, even from a brief overview of the recorded data, that the activities performed alone are fewer than the ones performed with someone else. Consumption is therefore most of the time presented as something that is undertaken with others and, more specifically, with friends and family<sup>142</sup>; in a particular case, "La scatola dei desideri", consumption appears to be even essential to the relationship between Jeremy and Lizzy.

### **Consuming to reaffirm, express or modify social ties**

Numerous examples of consumption activities performed with the purpose of reaffirming, reinforcing and modifying social ties can be found in the books.

The starting point of the adventure of "Diario di una schiappa" is in itself a collective consumption activity: a family trip, undertaken with the purpose of

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<sup>141</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 26.

<sup>142</sup> See chapter 5 – Discussion and conclusions.

strengthening the relationship among family members, who usually do not have as many opportunities in their daily routine to spend time together. Of course in this case this is not a prerequisite for the existence of the social relationship, but it represents merely another way to affect it in a positive way.

The people with whom you consume change your way of performing this activity. In “La scatola dei desideri”, Jeremy says that it was one or two years since he last went to the flea market, because after his father’s death this activity feels not the same (p. 58). He also refuses completely to eat healthy food, but when in company of Lizzy or other members of her family, he tries to make an effort and eats the “less terrible” healthy item (p. 44).

When Geronimo meets an English literature professor at Columbia University, the latter buys him a cup of chocolate and gives him a map of New York as a present, in this way reinforcing the relationship they have just created with the exchange of information. Gift-giving is a typical activity to express and communicate the existing ties between individuals. Jeremy’s mother, in “La scatola dei desideri”, instead of expressing with words the fact that she cares about his son, passing through a difficult phase of his life, gives him a “mutant candy” to be added to his collection (p. 41).

Consumption can also be used to express the fact that the dynamics of a relationship are changed. For example, in “Cyberbulli a tappeto”, in order to show that the desired behavior has had a positive impact on a problematic relation, the two characters are portrayed as drinking tea together after they calmed down (p. 62).

### **Eating as a social activity**

Eating plays an important role as a socializing activity in all the six books and therefore it will be analyzed in this dedicated section. It is interesting to notice that there is not a single book, even the really small one about the life of Frida Kahlo, that does not mention eating and drinking. This finding is consistent with the idea that

eating is the most “primitive” consumption activity<sup>143</sup>. Eating is also the most depicted behavior in the visual elements of the books.

For example, eating is pervasive in “Diario di una schiappa”, in the text as well as in the visuals<sup>144</sup>. The setting of the story is a family holiday in which a great part of the time shared together is the time of eating: independently from the time of the day and the place where they decide to eat, family members try to always do it together. They have breakfast together as first activity in the morning (p. 79), eat together in the hotel room some snacks bought at the drive-in, are really happy to have found the best apple pie ever and to eat twice the dose (p. 140); they share lunch at the bar (p. 174) or at the autogrill (p. 187). If they do not manage to eat together it is always because of some external accidents and circumstances. One evening, for example, the characters decide to stop at a restaurant in order to eat all together and then give the remainders to the pig, but Rodrick, one of the children, is not admitted inside because he does not have a shoe, so they are forced to take turns to eat.

It is the case of Jeremy and Lizzy in “La scatola dei desideri”, where the strong friendship between the two is often reinforced by the act of sharing food. Friendship is about doing a lot of things together and, more than everything else, the characters eat and give each other candies and fruit jelly, with the purpose of strengthening the relationship, supporting each other or taking comfort from this activity (pp. 11, 34)<sup>145</sup>. It rarely happens that one of the two characters eats something without offering the same to the other and this makes undeniably clear how special the relationship is. The proof that this food-sharing is quintessential to the friendship lies in the fact that, once the contrary happens (Lizzy not sharing a fruit jelly), Jeremy remains shocked, interprets it as a shift in their bond, and even registers it as a note in his diary (p. 143).

In “Inseguimento a New York”, when thinking about Christmas and comfortable family moments, Geronimo always associates eating with being together

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<sup>143</sup> See p. 6.

<sup>144</sup> See Appendix D.

<sup>145</sup> The comforting sensation coming from consuming food is mentioned more than once in the books (for example in *La scatola dei desideri* at p. 34 or in *Diario di una schiappa* when the family finds a place to eat a really good apple pie and for some time forgets about all problems occurring during the trip) and may deserve further analysis.

around a table full of food (pp. 9, 89). This is also particularly evident in the visuals, because food always appears at the center of crowded rooms during gathering occasions (pp. 2-3, 101, 105)<sup>146</sup>.

In “Dov’è Wally?”, half of the intricate images full of many different characters represent eating activities<sup>147</sup>.

### **Partial conclusions**

As demonstrated by this set of findings, one of the most important roles of consumption regards the strengthening, supporting, reaffirming, expressing and modifying of interpersonal bonds. Consumption can be used as a means to be more similar to others, to be integrated into groups, to be recognized as a member of a family or to strengthen a social tie, and consuming is a key feature of most acts of socialization in the books. Its presence is so pervasive that it can be stated that it seems nearly impossible for a relationship to exist without consuming something together, especially in “La scatola dei desideri” and “Diario di una schiappa”.

There is a less positive side of this observation and that can be found in “Inseguimento a New York!”. In fact, in this book, Geronimo is often recognized as not belonging to New York City’s community because of his way of behaving and consuming. For example, when some girls doing jogging risk to slam against a disorientated Geronimo they say: “Ma che cosa fa quel babbeo? Ma chi è quello lì? Ma da dove viene? Si capisce che non è di New York!”<sup>148</sup> (p. 89). Consuming like the other members of your social circle, be it a wide one or the smaller one of family and friends, can allow you to be recognized as a member and assimilated to the group, as well as risking exclusion. This theme is strictly related to the existence of social norms that will be discussed later in this chapter.

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<sup>146</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>147</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>148</sup> What is this fool doing? Who is he? Where does he come from? It is clear that he is not from New York!

#### ***4.2.3 Code 1.3 - Consumption with symbolic, metaphoric, and cultural meanings***

This final code pertinent to the first theme is an extension of sorts of the previous one. The act of attributing objects more than functional purposes and meanings can be extended by assigning them symbolical, metaphorical or cultural ones. The difference between this code and the previous one is evident in how this feature is described within the books: if objects or consumption habits are used to shape identities, usually they are not accompanied by an explanation by the author or a character, while in the case of less obvious symbolic, metaphoric and cultural meanings, there is usually a comment elaborating these instances.

Among the books analyzed in the present research there is a clear example of a symbolic meaning attributed to an object: the box with the phrase “The meaning of life” etched on it. The box in itself, not only its content, acquired for Jeremy a particular meaning because it is a present from his late father and it is to be opened only on the day of his thirteenth birthday. The character himself comments this symbolical attribution of meaning by saying that the box is an emblem of all his hopes and failures (p. 8).

The idea that objects can express one’s personality has been mentioned before in relation with the habit of collecting and arranging things in peculiar ways, but can be extended to the point of making objects expressing values and transmitting emotions, in this way becoming pieces of art: in “La scatola dei desideri” this totally non-functional way of employing objects is mentioned several times (pp. 18, 71).

In more than one book, objects are used to symbolize comfort and protection: In “Inseguimento a New York” Geronimo is disappointed and finds comfort inside his blanket that feels similar to a hug (p. 24); in “La scatola dei desideri”, after the death of his father, Jeremy spends three weeks inside a sleeping bag until he becomes able to sleep again outside of it (p. 13); the same Jeremy hugs a fake crocodile and

finds comfort in this gesture (p. 174). Particular comforting properties are often associated with food, a topic that arguably constitutes a great concern and that will be discussed more extensively later on<sup>149</sup>.

Finally, for example, in “Frida Kahlo” there is a cultural attribution of meaning in a side note explaining that the way she is dressed is consistent with Mexican tradition and that her skirt represents a typical item worn by Indios women (p. 26)<sup>150</sup>. At p. 16, there is also another cultural reference to the *Día de los Muertos*, a festive day of the year when people dress in a peculiar, rather fancy, way and eat outside in the cemeteries (obviously here there is no functional coherence in eating in a cemetery, but there is only a cultural explanation for it).

### **Partial conclusions**

These examples of symbolism and of use consumption and consumption goods as metaphors, can help to explain how sometimes people consume certain things in apparently irrational and non-functional ways. Some of these consumption behaviors can then acquire a borderline pathological connotation, a problem that is sometimes present in the sample of books and that will be discussed in the section dedicated to the third theme.

## ***4.3 Theme 2 – Reinforcing Social Norms***

It has been stated before that the social aspect of consuming makes a difference in consumption behaviors. The same is true for the *what, when, where* and *how* to consume, this being the case of representing normative elements, in terms of social expectations and distinctions. In the case of this book sample, the distinction, rather than consisting in a voluntary diversion from social norms to stand out, is more

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<sup>149</sup> See par. 4.4 – Dysfunctional behaviors.

<sup>150</sup> See Appendix E.

a differentiation from common behaviors that are judged not in line with the characters' ethical values<sup>151</sup>.

No differences emerge in the set of social norms characterizing the different books, even if some of them are written in Italian and others have been translated or come from a completely different cultural and social context ("Frida Kahlo"), so we can conclude that they follow an almost common set of social norms.

#### ***4.3.1 Code 2.1 – Social expectations***

The code of social expectations concerns the existence of social norms which affect the way characters consume in order not to diverge from them. Talking about social expectations implies the assumption that there is a bilateral relationship: society is somewhat homogenized through consumption and the way the individuals consume is shaped by social and cultural expectations. In all books considered there is a high degree of normativity that is taken for granted and this is particularly true for "Inseguimento a New York", that is set during Christmas Holidays, a festive period when consumption behaviors are particularly influenced by culture and social norms. There are only few examples of divergence from the norm: when the divergent behaviors are voluntary they are usually judged as inappropriate while, when the divergence depends from external circumstances, it is a source of great concern for the characters.

The fact that the existence of social norms is taken for granted is evident in the fact they are widely present in the consumption scenes within the books, but they are almost never emphasized as such: the related behaviors are perceived as natural and obvious. For example, offering someone something to eat if they come around for a visit, in "La scatola dei desideri" (p. 90) or offering something to eat to your neighbors when they settle in (p. 74), is a typical way to create social ties that is taken for granted.

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<sup>151</sup> Ginman and Lundquist identify also consuming as an activity to distinguish themselves from the ones following social norms at pp. 46-47, but this code assume a slightly different connotation in my analyzed sample.

The only occasion where a character is really concerned not to successfully meet social expectations is in “Inseguimento a New York”, when Geronimo is expected to bring a lot of presents to the MacMouse family because it is Christmas and they offered to host the entire Stilton Family (pp. 27, 39). Geronimo is also worried that the real reason behind the decision to spend Christmas holidays in New York is that, in the past, he has not been able to meet some expectations related to food, decoration and gift-giving, and this caused the family to decide not to spend Christmas at his place anymore (p. 26).

In order to better analyze the different kinds of social norms playing a role in shaping consumption behavior, Ginman and Lundquist’s division was followed, with some adjustments, in the three subcategories of “social status, roles and age”, “gender” and “legitimate contexts”, as it was found relevant also in regard to the data available for the present research<sup>152</sup>.

### **Social status, roles and age**

This category relates with the idea that some consumption behaviors are appropriate (or not) in relation with social status, roles and age. Most of these instances are found in the books “La scatola dei desideri” and “Inseguimento a New York”.

Expected consumption behaviors are related to social status in “Inseguimento a New York” when Geronimo is not believed to have been invited at the MacMouse’s by the doorman because he is dressed inappropriately for the social status of that wealthy family and the standards of people living in the building (p. 97). The existence of an expected consuming behavior in relation with social status is even more evident when characters do something outside their economic possibilities and this generates surprise: this is the case of Jeremy and Lizzy in “La scatola dei desideri” moving around in limousine (p. 173). The same expectations are in place for people playing particular roles in society. For example, in “Inseguimento a New York”, one of the members of the MacMouse family is described as a successful manager and therefore he wears a tie even when grocery shopping (p. 19).

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<sup>152</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 40.

The two protagonists of “La scatola dei desideri” are almost thirteen and therefore in an age of transition between childhood and adolescence. Jeremy and Lizzy often make incursions in the adults’ world and, in doing so and trying to conform to its social norms, they are immediately perceived as behaving strangely. For example, they are elegantly dressed in order to enter a building that hosts many business activities; once they are discovered by the guard, they are commented on as inappropriately attired for such a young age (p. 124). Not only there are consumption behaviors that are seen as inopportune because they are typical of adulthood, but the inverse is true: some practices are connected with childhood and thus not acceptable anymore for an adult. Jeremy’s mother decides to make him eat different varieties of foods, since it not appropriate for a young boy to continue eating only what he likes (pp. 128-129). The same surprise is expressed by the strangers in the streets of New York who see Geronimo passing by on a skateboard and stigmatize that as an inappropriate behavior of which one should be ashamed at his age (“Inseguimento a New York”, p. 53).

## **Gender**

There are of a lot instances where consumption norms apply to gender and they emerge most of the time because they are violated. This code raises the issue of stereotypical representation of gender in some of the books in the sample.

In “Diario di una schiappa” both parents are mostly presented as caring, still the mother is the only one always concerned with eating, and who says that they need to find a place to perform this activity; at pp. 57-58, even if Rodrick is assigned to go and buy food, it is always his mother who decides what to eat, making a list. Some gender-related implications can be also seen in the fact that Greg’s father is always in charge of repairing a wide range of mechanical things (pp. 12, 135).

Gendered consumption extends to characters’ appearances and clothes. In “La scatola dei desideri” Lizzy is described as feminine because she does not tie up her hair and wears a skirt (p. 94); when she and Jeremy visit a flea market she pretends not to be interested in make-up items because she wants to save her

reputation as a tomboy (p. 64), in this way suggesting that desiring that particular kind of objects is typically interpreted by society as “for girls”.

Frida Kahlo is stated in a side note to be a rebellious character because she refuses to conform to consumption behaviors considered acceptable for a girl/woman: she is sometimes seen wearing men’s clothes from a young age (p. 8) and she is represented holding a bottle of tequila in her hand because she likes to spend time in bars drinking with her friend Tina Modotti, even if that behavior was not acceptable for women at the time (p. 26).

This trend of gendered consumption is reinforced by comparison with other characters. Lizzy, at the beginning of “La scatola dei desideri” appears as perfectly confident in her practical way of dressing and brushing her hair, but after meeting the new neighbor, Samantha, she becomes more concerned in dressing fashionably, altering her appearance with make-up and jewelry to seek social approval (pp. 172-173). This is again an instance where consumption is tightly related to social acceptance and identity shaping, a previously analyzed code<sup>153</sup>.

Finally, another sort of social expectation is included in this particular category, which appears only in “La scatola dei desideri”. Since Jeremy and Lizzy spend a lot of time together and behave kindly with each other, they are thought to have an affair: this implies somehow limiting the spectrum of possible configurations of relationships between genders (p. 63).

### **Legitimate contexts**

This code is also particularly relevant in the representation of consumption and concerns the circumstances under which it is legitimate to consume some goods or adopt some consumption behaviors. Social expectations in these cases prescribe which consumption behaviors can be undertaken in which situations: the *where* and *when* of consumption.

It was mentioned that, when entering a prestigious building that hosts business activities, Jeremy and Lizzy in “La scatola dei desideri” are expected to be

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<sup>153</sup> See par. 4.2.1.

well dressed. In the same book, one of the notes of Mr Oswald reveals that Mabel Billingsly sold her precious volume of Winnie the Pooh in order to purchase a dress for the debutante ball, another instance where one is expected to be perfectly dressed (p. 165).

There are some places in which the avoidance of certain food is expected, because it can disappoint others. For example, in “La scatola dei desideri”, Jeremy and Lizzy are complaining about a man eating a garlic-smelling sandwich inside a metro coach, even naming him “Garlic-Man” (p. 104). In the same book, Lizzy makes fun of Jeremy who reads even during summertime, suggesting that intellectual activities are not suitable for that season, when a child is expected to play around and have fun (p. 144). In “Diario di una schiappa” a typical context in which there is a limited set of acceptable behaviors is school: all children from Greg’s class are obsessed with books from the series “Ladri di mutande”<sup>154</sup> but, since their content is not considered educational and appropriate for children that age, they are banned (pp. 50-52)<sup>155</sup>.

## **Partial Conclusions**

All the above examples suggest that there is a system of norms that shape how individuals of a specific social status, role, age, and gender are expected to consume, independently from their effective needs and desires. In the analyzed sample, it is noticeable how these social norms are taken for granted most of the time and criticized only when violated.

Some of the findings seem also to suggest that is typical only of unusually bold and rebellious characters to go beyond these social norms, because they do not need to be afraid of punishment or social exclusion that could come as a result.

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<sup>154</sup> “Underwear thieves”.

<sup>155</sup> See Appendix D.

### **4.3.2 Code 2.2 – Distinction**

The last considerations about not being afraid of the social exclusion that could come from disregarding consumption-related social norms leads directly to the second code, consuming to stand out. Most of the examples in the books regard individual distinction from a society of which one does not share rules and values, and it can become a way to protest against it.

This is the case of unusual consumption behaviors of Jeremy's mother in "La scatola dei desideri" who, for ethical and environmental reasons, refuses to buy new things, even if she could afford them, because she considers it stupid and not sustainable (p. 14). Similar reasons convinced Rudolph Simon to sell everything he possessed and to give away all of his money even if he was incredibly rich (pp. 194-195). Other comparable nonconformist consumption choices are shown in "Diario di una schiappa" when Greg's mother does not want her sons to buy food from the fast-food, stating that they are trying to lure children in their trap in order to feed them sugar and fat (p. 34). Concerns about the unfairness of consumption society are expressed in "Frida Kahlo" (p. 18): when living in the United States she said that "it is scary to see rich people having parties, while millions of others are dying because of starvation"<sup>156</sup>.

In a few cases, the refusal to conform to social norms or imposed behaviors is not motivated by ethical considerations and can make the characters feel emotions such as excitement coming from transgression. This is the case of Lizzy, who is not allowed to indulge in unhealthy food and drinks at her place, so she is particularly excited about consuming an orange soda inside the limousine (p. 173).

### **Partial conclusions**

It is interesting to notice that people expressing nonconformist behaviors are geographically or historically far away from the current context (Frida Kahlo), play a marginal role in the book (Rudolph Simon), are the ones who are sometimes made

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<sup>156</sup> "Spaventa vedere i ricchi festeggiare, mentre milioni di persone muoiono di fame".

fun of (Jeremy's mother) or complained about (Greg's mother). This connotation subtly suggests that there is no place in the current society for these kinds of behaviors; they can only remain marginal and cannot be considered as actual, viable alternatives to the most accepted social configuration.

### ***4.4 Theme 3 – Dysfunctional behaviors***

The third theme identified is the one that falls under the definition of “dysfunctional behaviors”. In the analyzed books there is a number of representations of consumption behaviors that can be regarded wrong or borderline dysfunctional that are however presented in an ironical and funny way, thus understating the potential harmful messages that can be conveyed.

These kinds of consumption activities are not present in all books, but are significantly expressed in half of them. They are not homogeneous in nature, but they can be commonly described as consumption behaviors that never have functional purposes: sometimes they go against social norms, and they are not performed with the usual timing, frequency, measure, or generate, to some extent, issues in the life of the character.

#### ***4.4.1 Code 3.1 – Unhealthy relationship with food***

Even if consumption activities are sometimes represented as giving more than the satisfaction to an utilitarian need, in the book “La scatola dei desideri”, there is a pervasive representation of an unhealthy relationship with food that concerns one of the main characters, Jeremy.

Jeremy refuses to eat anything but candies, chocolaty things or peanut butter sandwiches and the pathological extent of this behavior is underlined by the allusion to the fact that, even when he sweats, he smells like peanut butter (p. 5). At p. 291, when Ms Sanchez offers him and Lizzy some tacos because they look hungry, Jeremy hides the tacos inside the backpack and extract a peanut butter sandwich that is the only thing that he is willing to eat; in a similar manner, when his mother and grandmother organize a picnic for his birthday, he gets really upset when he notices that peanut butter sandwiches are not included (p. 328). Moreover, he states that he eats scrambled eggs for breakfast only if his grandmother sprinkles them with chocolate (p. 309), or that he particularly likes some biscuits because there is a melted piece of chocolate inside each of them (p. 223). At p. 88, when remembering

the previous edition of New Jersey's fair, he observes that fairs are always the right opportunities to indulge in huge quantities of food without control.

More serious seems the fact that, every time he feels sad, he tries to alleviate these feelings by eating something sweet, often in huge quantities: at p. 227, he ironically remarks that in such an awkward moment he would sell his left feet in exchange for two chocolate donuts; at p. 149 he explicitly declares that he is looking for a candy in his backpack as moral support; at p. 223, he describes chocolate as the only thing that is able to contrast depression<sup>157</sup>; at p. 210 he lists eating sweet food among the reasons for living (and there would be many more examples).

In the other books, for example in "Diario di una schiappa" this dangerous connection between food and feelings of happiness and satisfaction is only marginally alluded to: for example, at p. 140, Greg's family is so pleased to have finally found a good restaurant, that they indulge in a "double dose" of apple pie; or at p. 87, Greg and Rodrick are somehow excited by a kind of food that would be banned by their mother.

Of course the psychological implications of such a disordered relationship with food fall abundantly out of the scope of the present research, and in some way even this kind of dysfunctional relationship contributes to the realism of the story by mentioning a problem that is of actual concern for our society. What can be considered as a source of worry is the fact that this kind of behavior is almost never condemned or presented in a negative way. The fact that Jeremy only eats candies and peanut butter sandwiches is only vaguely remarked upon by his mother and grandmother as not normal for a boy his age, but they are the first to be indulgent in regards to his sugar overload; his best friend Lizzy even collaborates to the perpetuation of this dysfunctional behavior by offering him something sweet to eat whenever he is sad (p. 34).

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<sup>157</sup> *Depressione* is the exact term employed in the original text.

#### **4.4.2 Code 3.2 – Accumulation of goods**

In the books there is not only an exaggerated consumption of food, but more generally a tendency to portray characters who accumulate a variety of material goods for no functional reason.

In “Diario di una schiappa”, for example, there is more than one reference to accumulation of useless objects. After the father decides to buy a boat that remained unused by the family, they transform it in a deposit for old and useless objects. Once they decide to use the boat again it is very difficult to do so because it is completely submerged by items and even a tree was growing under it (pp. 18-19). Another relevant reference is to their aunt Stacey who has the tendency to accumulate, among other things, magazines and newspapers; this is so out of control that she keeps even a stupid paper character called Flat Stanley (p. 27). Even if not heavily condemned, there is a subtle negative connotation given to this kind of behaviors; in the case of the father, because he creates many problems to the family life and in the case of the aunt because she is made fun of.

Completely different is the case of “La scatola dei desideri”, where the accumulation of objects is described to be a peculiar characteristic of the protagonist’s family and even a way of expressing their personalities: Jeremy’s mother is said to keep useless stuff without any reason (p. 60); Jeremy’s father favorite motto is “something that for one man is trash, can be treasure for another” (p. 63); Jeremy defines a room full of many and various objects as “his parents idea of paradise” (p. 139).

This insistence on the subject of accumulation is the counterpoint of the near absence of representation of the disposal stage in the consumption cycle, Therefore the books offer on one hand many examples of accumulation of objects, but on the other hand the discarding or recycling of these objects is never discussed as well as the related costs.

## ***4.5 Theme 4 – General economic system and Consumption Cycle***

The last theme is more general and concerns the representation of the economic system within the books. Of course, since they are really different in terms of targeted age, a representation of a complex economic environment and of various exchange systems is almost exclusive of the two books “La scatola dei desideri” and “Diario di una schiappa”, even if there are traces of that also in “Frida Kahlo” and “Cyberbulli al tappeto”. Coherently with Ginman and Lundquist’s findings<sup>158</sup>, it has been found that this theme provides an incomplete portrait of the economic system and that the different stages of the consumption cycle are only partially represented.

This section includes the discussion on the representation of various exchange systems, payment methods, and stages of the consumption cycle.

### ***4.5.1 Code 4.1 – Exchange systems***

Although not systematically, in the mentioned books many different exchange systems are represented as alternative modes to exchange goods and services: the market economy (including second hand markets, flea markets, pawn shops), the barter system, sharing and borrowing, do-it-yourself, gift-giving and stealing. However, the dominant model is the market economy in its many different configurations, in particular second-hand market in “La scatola dei desideri”.

#### **The market economy**

In the books there are countless examples portraying the market economy, either through words or visual elements.

The existence of a market economy is pervasive in the visual elements of the book “Inseguimento a New York”: in almost every illustration there are bars,

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<sup>158</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 69.

restaurants and shops in the background<sup>159</sup>. Similarly, in “Diario di una Schiappa”, illustrations play an important role in giving the idea of how a street, a restaurant, an hotel, a shop, a fair usually look like (pp. 59, 60, 86, 87, 98, 102, 125, 130, 140 and so on). Even if the illustrations are full of hints on the marketplace and its normal functioning, there are rarely explicit representations of the actual economic activities that are performed inside these places: we can rarely see a cash point, shopkeepers and salesmen, or information about the internal layout of the shops<sup>160</sup>.

There are also some cases where different examples of institutions located within the market economy are mentioned: Jeremy in “La scatola dei desideri” alludes to the fact that he could make a lot of money on eBay by selling his collection of “mutant candies” (p. 7); the same refers that his mother buys food and clothing online (p. 13) and says that he does not need to exit his district because there he can find all places needed to perform consumption activities, such as cinemas, shops, supermarkets and so on (p. 32); at p. 16 of “La scatola dei desideri” Lizzy mentions a bank, as a place where you can find a lot of money; in “Diario di una schiappa” the common idea of entertainment is associated with aquatic parks and funfairs (for example p. 164-165).

“La scatola dei desideri” is really relevant in giving a faithful and complex image of the second-hand market, one of exchange systems of a market economy. The extent to which this kind of institution is described marks an exception in the general picture of otherwise incomplete representations: Jeremy’s mother buys almost everything in secondhand shops, and this is repeatedly stated as the favorite buying method of his father (pp. 14, 16-17, 58, 63 and so on); Jeremy and Lizzy visit more than once a flea market, a place that is extensively described and commented with indications on why people search for things in that kind of place instead of a normal shop (p. 66)<sup>161</sup>; the character of Mr Oswald, offers then the occasion to mention also the existence of pawn shops and, thanks to the history of his grandfather, to go briefly through the history of this institution (p. 135-136). As

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<sup>159</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>160</sup> Three exceptions can be found only in “Diario di una schiappa”, pp. 62, 102, 110). See Appendix D.

<sup>161</sup> A vendor explains to Lizzy that people look for second hand things for many different reasons, for example to find spare parts that they are not able to find anywhere else, or to find something to add at their collections and so on.

already marked, most of the time, the reasons behind the choice of this alternative exchange system, among all the possibilities, are clearly explained and there are also economical considerations on the possibility of making money with this kind of activity.

Many other elements characterizing market economy, more than the exchange system and the places of acquisition, are also mentioned in the considered books, such as advertising (“La scatola dei desideri” p. 60) price promotions (“Diario di una schiappa” p. 107) and brand names. It is interesting to notice that the use of brand names is observable only in one of the books in the sample: “Diario di una schiappa”, where, however, brand names appear only three times and, although verisimilar, are not real-life brands (“Famiglia Insieme” as the name of the magazine Greg’s mother is reading, “Chez Henri” at p. 124, “Tsunamiland” for the aqua park at pp. 150 and 163). All the other businesses and products are designated with general names describing the typology of products and service offered. “La scatola dei desideri” seems to be totally and deliberately avoiding using brand names, seeing that, even when Jeremy is consuming a cola or Lizzy is drinking an orange soda, the beverages are designated with a general category name instead of choosing the easier way of mentioning the brand (p. 253).

No conclusions can be drawn about the awareness of this choice throughout the sample: perhaps some educative considerations can be involved, taking into account the intent of depicting a world as far as possible from consumerist society, or this can be the result of a simple attention to not giving preference to a brand over another and thus avoiding subtle advertisement.

### **Payment methods**

This small section is dedicated to the representation of different payment methods, as in the books there are many examples of that. In fact, even when the exchange takes place within a market economy, there are many alternatives to proceed to payment. Notably is there are even allusions to the dematerialization of money.

The most obvious way to pay for products and services is to use money: in “Diario di una schiappa” money is many times mentioned and represented in illustrations (e.g. p. 58)<sup>162</sup>; in “La scatola dei desideri”, money is the most common way to pay for something and Jeremy always carries eight dollars in his pocket in order to be sure to be able to come back home (p. 102). In “Diario di una schiappa” there are also many references to credit cards as methods of payment and, at the end of the story, after they have lost their wallets, Greg’s parents need to have their credit cards blocked and to ask for new ones (p. 214). In “La scatola dei desideri” there are also other different dematerialized methods of payment, such as the one through tokens (p. 41) or rechargeable cards (p. 59). When money or credit cards are not available, the alternative option seems to be the barter system or stealing goods.

In all books there is a complete lack of discussion on why and when using a method instead of another would be more convenient, or about the advantages and disadvantages of one over another.

### **Sharing and borrowing**

The books are full of different examples of sharing and borrowing. I agree with Ginman and Lundquist when they state that “consumption can be viewed as an alternative to acquiring your own accord, either by using something someone else has acquired or by acquiring something jointly with someone else”<sup>163</sup>. There is a most natural “sharing” that is taken for granted, that is the one happening within family settings, and another one that is explicitly motivated as a way to create or reinforce social ties or to show kindness and gratitude.

For example, in “Diario di una schiappa” family members share a lot of goods, from food and drinks to car and hotel rooms. The proof that this sharing system is viewed as completely natural is that the “family sharing system” is explicitly mentioned only when Rodrick does something that goes against the common interest: when assigned to purchase food for all, he buys only his favorite items (p.

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<sup>162</sup> See Appendix D.

<sup>163</sup> Ginman and Lunquist 2014, p. 51.

64). In “La scatola dei desideri”, Jeremy and his mother have dinner together everyday and share iced tea when they discuss (pp. 34, 128-129).

Sharing to create and express social ties is another common purpose, that associates it with gift-giving. It was discussed before how the sharing of goods and consumption activities can be used as a way to establish and reinforce a relationship: for example Jeremy and Lizzy sharing sweets, candies and snacks in “La scatola dei desideri” (pp. 11, 34, 61 and so on), Lizzy and Samantha listening to music together, once they become friends, and so on (p 221). It can be also motivated by the will to help others: this is the case of the baseball supporter in “La scatola dei desideri”, who helps the two protagonists by borrowing them his card for the underground (p. 59), or of the English literature professor in “Inseguimento a New York” who shares with Geronimo a cup of hot chocolate and gives him the possibility to access the university’s restrooms (p. 55).

## **Gift-giving**

Gift-giving is the second most represented way of exchanging goods.

It is a fundamental theme in “Inseguimento a New York” because the story is set during Christmas Holidays, a time of the year, in current consumerist society, considerably governed by many social conventions related to gift-giving. When referring to Christmas traditions, Geronimo mentions with no exceptions the exchange of gifts (pp. 9, 25) and boxes wrapped in colored paper are always part of the indoor scenes during Christmas Holidays. The importance of this tradition is made clear and the main worry that pushes Geronimo to follow a trail around New York in search for his luggage is having lost the Christmas presents for the MacMouse family. Another occasion in which gifts have a fundamental importance is a birthday: in “La scatola dei desideri”, Jeremy receives a special gift from his father, his mother and his best friend for his thirteenth birthday, and when told by Dr Grady about the birth of the universe, he ironically comments on the huge number of birthday presents that he is owed from his mother (p. 245).

When it is not during an expected circumstance, gift-giving can be a way to show kindness and affection or to show gratitude for something received. Examples

of that can be seen in Frida Kahlo's mother gesture of giving her the materials her father used for painting (p. 9), when Jeremy of "La scatola dei desideri" buys a present for his mother when wandering around a flea market, only because he is sure she is going to appreciate it even if it lacks monetary value (p. 64), and when Greg's family of "Diario di una schiappa" donates the boat to the Spanish guys who gave them a lift to go back home (p. 215).

Representation of gift-giving phenomena is really pervasive in the analyzed books and the wide range of occurrences that they offer reflects the actual variety of reasons and situations justifying gift-giving. Sometimes social norms dictate it, alone or together with affective reasons, sometimes gift-giving is a simple act of kindness or the display of gratitude. It shall also be noticed that gift-giving representation is based on social and cultural norms pertaining to Western consumption-based society and that no alternatives are shown to the phenomenon. It is difficult to say if this is a direct consequence of the limitation of the analyzed sample, or a general tendency in books targeted to children in Europe<sup>164</sup>.

### **Barter system**

The presence of a barter system is evident almost only from the case of "Inseguimento a New York" and it is characterized as a marginal exchange system, which takes places only in singular circumstances. In fact, it is represented by the fact that Geronimo loses his luggage and therefore his wallet, and he is not able to pay for the goods and services he needs. At p. 40, the taxi driver asks for his golden fountain pen in exchange for the ride, at p. 74 he pays for the ride with a golden watch.

Some ironical allusions to a sort of barter system are present also in "La scatola dei desideri", for example when Jeremy says that he would gladly give away his left foot in exchange for some sweets (p. 229).

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<sup>164</sup> See also Ginman and Lunquist 2014, p. 54.

The reason behind this underrepresentation can be the simple fact that this system is seen as obsolete, and thus generates useless know-how in the current economic system.

### **Do-it-yourself**

Do-it-yourself is not present in the books as a convincing alternative method to the acquisition of goods through the market. It is in fact a method which appears only in “Diario di una schiappa”, where it is always put in place with the aim of saving money or when the family does not have the economic possibility to purchase a new item or to pay for a repairing service. At pp. 19-20 Greg’s father repairs the boat on his own in the cheapest way; at p. 135 he builds a DIY roof for the car. Both these solutions are not going to last for long in the adventure and they will generate a lot of problems for the characters.

It is definitely true that from this representation children cannot conclude that creating things can be an actual alternative to buying. It is a saddening observation, because in the current world it would be a great opportunity to teach children that they can find innovative solutions to consumption that could make them save money while at the same time making good, sustainable choices for the future of the planet and even express their innovative ideas.

### **Stealing and corruption**

The representation of stealing may raise some concerns because most of the time no moral attitude, be positive or negative, is explicitly articulated on the matter of theft.

In “La scatola dei desideri” Lizzy, the heroine of the story, is caught stealing at least two times by Jeremy and, even if the items are of low or no value, these actions are only timidly condemned and never discovered by the victims (e.g. p. 10). Even Geronimo Stilton, who is portrayed as a totally positive character, uses an expedient to enter the Natural History Museum without paying, an act that can be easily compered to theft: this again has no negative repercussions.

There are only two cases in which stealing appears to be somehow stigmatized. The first case appears in “Diario di una schiappa”, when the antagonist family is thought to have stolen all the family’s belongings (pp. 179-180); the other one is in “La scatola dei desideri”, when Jeremy and Lizzy are caught damaging a private office (pp. 119-122), an act that can be compared to stealing because of the loss of money produced. However, in the first case, the supposed thieves are not stopped by legal means but rather “punished” with an act of personal revenge (pp. 204-205); in the second one, even if the culprits are forced to refund the money through civic service, their act is seen as a necessary step in the development of the plot, is never explicitly condemned and even leads to a positive outcome in the adventure.

Since stealing is not a legal activity and as such should not be socially acceptable, these kinds of suspension of judgment cannot be considered helpful from an educational point of view.

The same perplexities are raised by the representation of a mild form of corruptions in some of the stories. For example, in “La scatola dei desideri”, Lizzy elaborates a plan in which they will attempt to corrupt a guard by means of food; in case of failure she states that she will resort to using her feminine wiles (p. 84). In “Diario di una schiappa”, a nurse is portrayed as giving an old woman a muffin to convince her to calm down (p. 2).

### **Partial conclusions**

From this brief incursion on the representation of the market economy we can state that books offer a lot of realistic elements that contribute to expose children to the reality of the market economy, from the illustration of places of acquisition of goods to the different payment methods and exchange systems. However, with the notable exception of “La scatola dei desideri”, these representations are most of the time incomplete or characterized by the presence of unrealistic elements.

The existence of different exchange systems can be noted, and, even if not extensively described, there is also some mention of common sharing communities that represent alternatives to the traditional formal market economy, like car-pooling.

A clear representation of a car-pooling system is in “La scatola dei desideri” (p. 258), but this is of course not sufficient to consider these alternatives as adequately represented in the sample.

In all books ethical and moral considerations regarding the fairness of the market system are almost absent, with the exceptions of an allusion in “Frida Kahlo”<sup>165</sup> (p. 18) and in “La scatola dei desideri”, when Jeremy’s mother states that buying new things when you can use secondhand ones is symptom of low intelligence (p. 14).

#### **4.5.2 Code 4.2 – Consumption cycle**

Usually the word “consumption” is used to evoke strictly the final phase of the process, but here it is assumed that a consumption cycle exists and that it is made up of the following stages<sup>166</sup>:

- need arousal
- decision-making
- acquisition/purchase
- consumption (in the sense of using, using up, manipulating, wasting etc.)
- valuation
- disposal

The purpose of this code is to register to what extent these various stages of the consumption cycle are represented in the sample and the consequent implications.

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<sup>165</sup> It could be related exclusively to the historical and geographical context.

<sup>166</sup> Here I am following the stages identified by Ginman and Lunquist 2014 p. 61, citing de Mooij 2010 and Singh et al. 2003.

## Need arousal

The first stage of every consumption process is the arousal of a need (e.g. wish, desire, urge, physical need) for consumption. This need can be generated internally (e.g. cold, hunger) or externally (e.g. marketing, advertising, environmental influences), and can be either functional (utilitarian) or not (hedonic)<sup>167</sup>.

Many examples of a typical need that can be generated internally is the arousal of hunger in “Diario di una schiappa” when, after many hours of travelling in the car, the family needs to eat something; this internally generated need can shift to an externally generated one, when advertising mechanisms compel children to express the need to it at a fast food (p. 34). This stratagem can be easily detected by an adult, but not by a child.

There are also many occurrences of externally generated needs. For example in “Diario di una schiappa”, Jeremy’s mother starts feeling the desire of organizing a family summer trip after finding the idea in a magazine (p. 5); in the same book, the children insist in going to the aqua park after having seen a flyer promoting it in a very capturing way (p. 150). Advertising seems to play an influence also in the need for Lizzy to cover her blemish, an urge she feels at the point of being ashamed of such a flaw being seen by the new neighbors (pp. 60, 91). Therefore, not only advertising, but also social expectations in the respective social circles influences the arousal of needs: Lizzy, in “La scatola dei desideri” starts thinking that she needs to wear make up after she becomes friend of Samantha who extensively uses it (pp. 172-173); in the same book, one of the notepapers of Mr Oswald reports that a guy wanted to sell his mother’s lamp because everybody in his social circle has a silver watch and consequently he also needs to own one (p. 186).

The cases of functional consumption are extremely common in the books and concern acts like using a torch to illuminate a dark ceiling in “La scatola dei desideri”, using a screwdriver to explore under a carpet or using a key to open a door; more than that, it is interesting to investigate the instances of hedonic needs, when the reasons to consume are more varied and the choice of the consumption objects is

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<sup>167</sup> For a discussion on these categories see Holbrook and Hirschman 1982a and 1982b; Hopkinson and Davashish 1999.

not determined by functionality. This is the case of Jeremy's habit of eating food to satisfy his need for comfort or affection or to calm down (pp. 69, 80, 102, 149 and so on). Hedonic as well is the need that leads Greg's father in "Diario di una schiappa" to buy a boat (p. 8) or Greg and Rodrick to go to the swimming pool (p. 66) or the family to listen to music while driving (p. 155).

## **Decision-making**

Decision-making in relation to consumption is a very prominent feature in two of the books, "Diario di una schiappa" and "La scatola dei desideri", that are also the ones representing in a more comprehensive way the consumption cycle as a whole. This stage deals with consumers' decisions in terms of what actions to pursue to satisfy their needs, like information-seeking, evaluation of different attributes of the available products, selection of goods or services.

Concerning the *who* of the decision-making process, the general picture given by the sample shows that children have a low level of autonomy when making consumption decisions, and, when they decide on their own they, usually make mistakes or end up in unpleasant situations.

In "Diario di una schiappa" Greg's mother is usually in charge of the decision-making process and, at the most, delegates other stages such as acquisition/purchase (p. 95). At p. 17, even if the children proposed to rent a camper, their mother rejects the idea as too expensive before it is even taken into consideration; the same happens when she imposes the family to listen to an educational CD in Spanish (p. 29) or refuses to go to Tsunamiland (p. 139). It is however interesting to notice that, after a long list of awkward adventures due to her decisions, Greg's mother is shown as willing to give up her decisional power in favor of a family voting system (p. 139-140). In "La scatola dei desideri", children do not appear completely autonomous in taking decisions. When it is the case of performing simple actions such as buying comics or a slice of pizza they do not need the supervision of an adult, but when it comes to behaviors perceived as adult-exclusive they need to ask for permission: Lizzy tells Jeremy to ask his mother if they are allowed to take the underground (p. 49); Jeremy's mother is upset when she gets to

know that they entered a private property intentionally without permission (pp. 125-127). In “Cyberbulli a tappeto” the act of browsing the internet is presented as an activity that needs the supervision of an adult in case you are very young (p. 77).

The representation of the different phases of a decision-making process appears as incomplete across the sample. It is very rare in the books to read or see a complete representation of the different stages of this decision-making process. Despite some exceptions, the books usually show the need, the final decision and who took it.

For example, the information-seeking phase can be done through different sources: personal (family and friends), commercial (adverts, salespersons, labels, flyers, and so on), public (internet, mass-media and so on), and experiential (product trial)<sup>168</sup>. Some of these sources appear in the books but they are isolated cases: at the beginning of “Diario di una schiappa”, the magazine that gives Jeremy’s mother the idea of the family trip is public source (p. 5). This is also the only case in which we can distinguish some clear observations on the reliability of the source, because it is stated more than once in the rest of the adventure that it has not been a good idea to follow the recommendations of that magazine. Other public sources are the GPS used many times in “Diario di una schiappa” and the internet, used many times by Jeremy and Lizzy in “La scatola dei desideri” (for instance at p. 42) and by the generic boy that appears in the exemplifications in “Cyberbulli al tappeto”. A commercial source is the mechanic who gives Greg’s father the information he needs to choose whether to repair the car or to make a cheaper arrangement (p. 181). Experiential sources such as expertise of someone in the field or of a family member are often referred to in “La scatola dei desideri” and they are useful to decide where to buy something (p. 65) or to list what is needed to realize a plan (p. 84).

To be completely represented, a decision-making process should take into account also some constraint to consumption. However, the only constraint represented in the books is money. The lack of money creates a lot of issues to Geronimo Stilton who is forced to use the obsolete barter system to be able to pay for a taxi ride (pp. 38, 74); the lack of monetary resources, generate difficulties to the

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<sup>168</sup> Cf. Kiel and Layton 1981.

family in “Diario di una schiappa”, so that they need to reduce their expectations about the trip.

### **Acquisition/purchase**

This phase of acquiring, obtaining, finding or receiving the service or good needed has been extensively discussed before at paragraph 4.5.1 in all aspects of different exchange and payment methods. We can underline again that this stage is the most comprehensively represented together with consumption, and that market economy dominates the representation of it.

### **Consumption**

This stage refers to the classical notion of consumption, which identifies the moment in which the acquired good or service is used. It is not relevant to account for all the consumption activities referred to in the books, so the focus will be on the explicit mention of consumption as an activity that should and can be learned.

There are in fact some cases of attempts at shaping consumption behaviors in order to teach the best or the most acceptable ways of performing an activity. For example, Jeremy’s mother explains to his son that he should introduce variety in his diet, vegetables included, and therefore decides to force him to eat a new meal for dinner every Monday (p. 128-129). The entire book “Cyberbulli a tappeto” is conceived with the normative purpose of teaching children how to “consume” social networks without incurring in negative consequences. In “Diario di una schiappa” Greg’s mother is always concerned about what her children consume (this is valid for food, p. 34 and 86, as well as for books, p. 46, electronic devices, p. 16, and general knowledge, p. 29).

The only complete representation of a learning process related to consumption is the one regarding Jeremy’s growing confidence in taking the underground: at the very beginning he is scared and tries to find ways to avoid it; when it comes to pay he and Lizzy always make mistakes, such as not having the right amount of money or

not having the proper card to enter the trains. At the end of the story, Jeremy takes the metro alone, buying a card and swiping it confidently, “like a commuter” (p. 357).

## **Evaluation**

It is worth now discussing two stages that are underrepresented in the books sample, occurring only a few times.

There are particularly few references to the evaluation process. Evaluation pertains to the phase in which a consumer assesses and evaluates the consumption goods acquired, or makes an evaluation on his/her consumption experience. This can occur during or after the consumption stage and can be the result of an individual reflection, of a discussion with another person, or of a collective evaluation coming from a shared experience.

For example, a general judgment is presented at the end of “Inseguimento a New York”, when Geronimo reflects upon his travel to New York in a very positive way (p. 110); in fact, at the beginning of the book, he has been forced to spend the holidays in New York by his grandfather, even if he was upset about breaking Christmas traditions.

The most detailed evaluation process is presented in “Diario di una schiappa”, even if it looks more like a reiterative decision-making process than a single evaluation moment: at p. 60, the characters arrive at an hotel which claimed to have air conditioning and swimming pool but, once they enter the room, they realize to have made a really bad choice; after an evaluation together, Greg’s mother goes back to the receptionist to ask for another room, but she does not obtain the change because of the contractual penalty.

Again, in “Diario di una schiappa”, after purchasing something that he liked at the supermarket, Rodrick is reprimanded by his mother because in the choice he did not take into consideration the fact that they did not have an oven at their disposal and therefore they could not consume that food (p. 64); in a similar manner, after having eaten a butter stick, Greg regrets it and says that he would not have been able to eat another one (p. 89).

## Disposal

This last stage may involve the different ways of getting rid of a good, like throwing it away, giving it away, recycling or destroying it. In the sample, this stage is few times verbally or visually mentioned, but never represented in detail. Neither the preferred choice nor the alternatives are explained and discussed. In “Diario di una schiappa”, Greg is shown as throwing away a piece of paper<sup>169</sup>; in “La scatola dei desideri” there are two brief references to recycling.

Even if the findings in this sample are a bit more promising than the ones of Ginman and Lundquist<sup>170</sup>, I can similarly affirm that the disposal stage it is hugely underrepresented and the main allusions are only made with the aid of illustrations.

Particularly alarming can be the complete lack of environmentally friendly disposal methods, such as recycling or reusing. Only in “La scatola dei desideri” there is a character, Jeremy’s mother, who appears to be aware of environmental problems and therefore offers her opinion about the necessity to make environmental-friendly choices when possible (p. 14)<sup>171</sup>, and recycling is mentioned once as an activity that can also make you earn money (p 122).

This topic is also relevant to the issue of accumulation that will be later discussed more in depth.

## Partial conclusions

Consumption stages are portrayed in many books, but this representation is neither homogeneous among the sample, nor systematic. The discussion is always limited to the most obvious and macroscopic aspects (such as the final decision and the decision-maker), but there are a lot of limitations in the treatment of all the other steps. For example, during the information-seeking phase, there is never a real comparison between the different kinds of sources with an evaluation of their reliability.

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<sup>169</sup> See Appendix D.

<sup>170</sup> Ginman and Lundquist 2014, p. 68.

<sup>171</sup> However, as stated before, the character is sometimes made fun of.

A consideration can be also done about the different level of complexity of the books. The various stages of the consumption cycle are presented comprehensively only in “Diario di una schiappa” and “La scatola dei desideri”, the two books that are targeted to older children and present a more sophisticated configuration of characters and situations.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ginman and Lundquist discuss in their research another code related to the positioning of the consumer subject in the marketplace. Even if I had some occurrences of this same code inside the present book sample, I have consciously decided to leave them out of the analysis or to mention them in connection with different codes, because they were not as many as to judge them relevant.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present research originates from the consideration that an effort to understand the contribution of children's book to their socialization as consumers would be welcome in the framework of research about consumer socialization. In the words of Ward, "some learning may occur through observation of response consequences to models"<sup>173</sup>, and therefore, as stated by Roedder John, "beyond mass media, socialization research should be broadened to include other aspects of marketing programs and promotions, but also other medium responsible for consumers' socialization"<sup>174</sup>. Studies in the field of narrative transportation and persuasion have proved stories to be one a powerful tool for changing the set of knowledge and beliefs about the world of their receivers.

Starting from this premise, children's books have been found to constitute a medium to transmit knowledge, attitudes and skills related to consumption practices and behaviors. The following section is therefore devoted to the discussion of the findings pertaining the four themes singled out as relevant to answer the research questions. Considerations about the completeness of information, its validity, and its homogeneity across the sample as well as moral and ethical issues are added to the factual discussion.

### Extended role of consumption

This theme is by far the most comprehensively represented in all books included in the sample and can be articulated in three codes: consumption for creating and shaping identities; consumption in relation to social ties; symbolical, metaphoric and cultural meaning of consumption.

Accordingly to Belk's definition of the "extended self"<sup>175</sup>, many examples show how consuming can be a way to extend an individual sense of identity or to infer information about others based on their consumption behavior. The first side of the

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<sup>173</sup> Ward 1997, p. 8.

<sup>174</sup> Roedder John 1999, p. 207.

<sup>175</sup> Belk 1988 and 2013.

process is more connected to an individual dimension<sup>176</sup>, while the second one, making judgments on others based on their consumption behaviors, is often carried out as a group. The awareness of the power of objects and consumption practices to shape and express identity leads to processes such as personalization and customization.

More than that, consumption appears to be central to the relationship between individuals, both inside and outside the family. While examples of the use of consumption to create a relationship are rare, consumption is abundantly used as a catalyst for already established relationships: consumption, especially of food, is the easiest way to affirm, express and modify these social ties. This fact is portrayed in general as a positive phenomenon, because consumption is never used to communicate the desire to end or refuse a relationship<sup>177</sup>.

Furthermore, the value of objects can go far beyond their simple functional value because symbolic, cultural, and even metaphorical values can be attached to it by means of different mechanisms. In this case, objects completely lose their connection with a functional and monetary value and are evaluated on the basis of subjective drivers.

Regarding the extended role of consumption it is possible to notice that a large amount and variety of examples is presented in the sample studied. Children can effectively learn from the books how to use consumption as a way to express their personality and they can gain awareness that they are also communicating such meanings to the external world. There is here the intrinsic risk of conveying to children a single model of identity construction, through material possessions and their consumption, as the lack of alternatives represented could result in an undervaluation of the development of other aspects of children's personalities.

Consumption, and food in particular, is also an effective way to create social inclusion, and to express and maintain relationships with others. Thus, consumption

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<sup>176</sup> Except from the case of "Frida Kahlo", where her consumption habits are sometimes a way to affirm a cultural identity and therefore intrinsically a group one.

<sup>177</sup> The only negative cases are presented in "Cyberbulli al tappeto" but for the only purpose of demonstrating their dysfunctionality and the way to correct them. This juxtaposition of a negative and a positive example can be the symptom in this book of a desire to provide comprehensive learning.

modalities are not context-independent and show to be influenced by the presence of other people and social and cultural norms, a topic that will be further discussed. The lack of an equal representation of positive and negative examples can affect children's awareness of the risk that the social aspect of consuming might also produce exclusion and stigmatization phenomena.

Finally, the finding that consuming is represented more as an activity to undertake together than an individual act, partially contradicts the current individualization of society, as opposed to the trends towards a private, alienated and passive consumption<sup>178</sup>.

### **Reinforcing social norms**

In the sample of books studied, a system of social and cultural norms shapes how individuals behave in relation to consumption, and these social norms are taken for granted because they are almost never underlined as such or challenged by the characters or the authors.

The two codes identified, reinforcing social norms and distinction, appear as the two sides of the same coin: social expectations lead the characters to conformity, while the desire of distinction brings them to the violation of social norms, although it is a rare occurrence.

Given that the aforementioned social norms are present and pervasive, and that this gives children a representation of current society that is almost realistic in terms of social conventions, some more considerations can follow.

We can observe that the represented social norms pertain exclusively to Western culture, without any articulate reference to cultural variation and diversity. A brief reference of a different culinary culture is in "La scatola dei desideri", when a Spanish neighbor offers the guys a tacos (p. 291). Unfortunately, even the book "Frida Kahlo" that seemed the most promising for the registration of different consumption norms, provided only some hints that are not that significant if compared with the whole sample: for example the skirt he wears comes from the

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<sup>178</sup> These trends have been individuated by Dholakia and Firat 2003.

Indios cultural heritage<sup>179</sup>. This completely homogeneous representation can be a consequence of the fact that the books are targeted to Western European children: this can facilitate the understanding of their cultural environment. However, this simplification fails to give children a comprehensive account of the multiplicity of cultures that are more and more prominent in the current society.

Moreover these social norms are not adequately challenged: not only the instances when this happens are few, but they are also carried out by marginal characters that in the act of defying the standards are sometimes perceived as weird. Thus, the stories fail to make apparent that social norms are not unchanging, like natural laws, and so they pose the risk of making children blind to different cultural perspectives. This might lead to a less dynamic and nuanced consumption society.

Furthermore, in all books there is a really stereotypical and therefore obsolete representation of gender-related consumption norms. This is particularly evident in “La scatola dei desideri”, where a girl in her early adolescence is portrayed as gradually adopting typical feminine consumption practices and willing to use her “feminine wiles” to corrupt someone; it is even more worrying the case of “Cyberbulli a tappeto”, a book with an explicitly stated normative intent, where girls are stereotypically portrayed as the ones taking pictures of blossoming trees, while guys play sports or listen to rock music together<sup>180</sup>. This kind of standardized representation can be harmful, as it seems anachronistic in respect to current society and fails to account for all the different nuances of gender expression. It has been also extensively proved how children’s books can influence gender roles construction<sup>181</sup>.

## **Dysfunctional Behaviors**

This theme, pertaining to the representation of dysfunctional behaviors such as unhealthy relationships with food and accumulation of goods, can be seen either under a positive or a negative light.

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<sup>179</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>180</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>181</sup> Béreaud 1975; Bruegilles et al. 2002; McCabe et al. 2011.

In fact, representing such behaviors can reflect the reality of our consumerist society where these behaviors are more and more frequent, but on the other side, the total lack of expression of judgment in regards to these behaviors can be detrimental to a learning perspective.

It would be in fact advisable to add normative indications, not only about *what* to consume, *with whom*, *how*, in which social context, following which social and cultural norms, but also *in which quantity*: moderation can be another value to be learned in relation to consumption. When these kinds of representation are portrayed in the sample, the consequences of these behaviors are almost never represented, neither from an individual point of view nor from a societal one.

### **Economic System and Consumption Cycle**

Concerning the representation of the economic system and the stages of the consumption cycle it is possible to notice a strong inhomogeneity across the sample. In fact, only two books, “Diario di una schiappa” and “La scatola dei desideri”, targeted to older children, offer a somewhat comprehensive and sophisticated image of the whole system. In the others, realistic elements are more vague and concern usually the only the stages of purchase/acquisition and consumption.

When the economic system is represented it is possible to observe a dominance of the market economy: there are few other instances as well in which characters make things themselves or acquire goods outside the market economy. From a learning perspective, even if the references to the market economy contribute to a realistic understanding of the current economic system, the lack of representations of a true, viable alternative could mean a reduction of children’s learning opportunities.

As well as the ones acting in opposition to social norms, the characters that embrace alternative exchange systems are usually marginal or the ones that are made fun of. As a consequence, the alternatives to market economy are never represented as actually working or desirable: the alternatives to buying and acquiring rarely generate positive outcomes. This is again a missed opportunity because children do not have the opportunity to learn that do-it-yourself, sharing, borrowing

and repairing are all perfectly worthy alternatives to buying new items through the market. All these alternatives could generate positive outcomes also in terms of their personal experience with their acquired goods and services, as well as resulting in better attitudes to environmental sustainability.

Another main finding concerns the extent of the representation of the various stages of the consumption cycle. There is a strong dominance in the representation of the acquiring/purchase and consumption stages.

Concerning the information-seeking phase, a positive remark can be made about the use of technology, that otherwise is almost absent from the setting of the stories<sup>182</sup>: characters are shown seeking information on the internet, receiving instructions via e-mail or searching for a place using the GPS.

During the decision-making stage, young characters are shown to have little autonomy and parents are the ones making the decisions regarding consumption. This is relatively unsurprising, because it seems to reflect the reality of decision-making process, but this way children do not learn anything relevant about this important stage of the consumption process. A noticeable positive finding is in the representation of mutual decision making within the family in “Diario di una schiappa”: even if this is an isolated case, we can consider it a promising attempt in portraying a articulated decision-making process that can be really helpful for consumer socialization. Among the skills that can be taught by such example there are the capability to negotiate and to accept a decision that goes against their personal preferences, but has been voted for the majority of people involved.

Children are provided with more satisfactory means to understand the stages of acquisition and consumption. For example instances can be found which point to the fact that consumption activities can be assimilated through the articulation of a learning process. In particular, in “La scatola dei desideri”, the learning process that leads from the incapacity to autonomously taking public transport to a confident use of the service, is comprehensively shows: it takes some trial and errors, such as

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<sup>182</sup> “Cyberbulli a tappeto” represent an obvious alternative because of its normative intent to teach how to properly use social networks.

some explanation from adults or more expert characters.

Similar means are not available for a complete understanding of the stages of evaluation and disposal, which are rarely presented and never elaborated upon. In particular, we find really serious the almost non-existence reference to recycling and the costs related to the disposal of goods.

Generally speaking, the implication of these findings is that children are not provided with a full description of the economic system and the consumption cycle and are not provided with the details and information they may need to fully and satisfactorily engaged in all these stages. In particular, a further elaboration on the evaluation and disposal stages, could give children an idea of the active role that they can actually play in society, being more *choosers* than *consumers*. A more holistic representation and understanding could therefore make them fully informed and empowered as consumers in society.

## **5.1 Implications**

The specific implications of the present study interest first of all the children themselves and their parents, then book writers, illustrators and translators, and finally libraries. More in general, advancements in the particular field of consumer socialization can be relevant also from a managerial viewpoint.

Children can learn through narrative transportation a wide variety of consumption behaviors related to many aspects of life. The representations given in the books, however, offer an incomplete picture of the consumption practices as a whole. Consumption is described as strongly influenced by social norms and dominant models, to which no alternative is given as truly viable: this is particularly relevant in regard to exchange systems and gender roles and expression. The stories appear in some aspects anachronistic, as technology is not adequately included in the “consumption lives” of the characters for it to be a credible image of contemporary society. This distance from reality is also reflected in the absence of a

strong awareness of the issues concerning disposal of objects and its related costs, as well as the lack of enough representations of environmental concerns.

Through the sample of stories analyzed, it emerges that children are provided with an incomplete training in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills related to consumption. This implies that the stories they read expose them to a narrow variety of examples, which all pertain to the same cultural background and practices.

For the following actors, the awareness that children can indirectly learn through books how to consume, gives them a responsibility to choose the aspects to expose children to. Parents should more carefully select the books for their children, as it is apparent that, even in “innocent” stories, are present elements that can influence their socialization as consumers. Book authors and illustrators should be aware of their choices when developing the setting and the plot of a story, even if consumption is not the main focus, as well as consider adding more variety to their works, contemplating the risks related to taking the dominant models for granted. Finally, for public libraries, this can be a challenge to achieve a more relevant selection of children’s literature taking into account also aspects related to their socialization as economic actors.

From a more “managerial” viewpoint, knowledge on consumption behavior and consumption mechanisms can contribute to the understandings of consumer needs in the various stages of their lives.

## ***5.2 Limitations and indications for further research***

This research represents merely a preliminary exploration into the subject and presents some limitation in scope and methodology that have been already mentioned in the appropriate sections.

Here it is worth summarizing that the sample of books considered is relatively small because it includes only six books, coming from the two categories of “Adventure” and “Family, personal and social problems”. These books were the most popular in the month of April 2016 in Italy. The findings of the research cannot

therefore be generalized without broadening the sample, or, for example, by adding other criteria to the book selection.

Other limitations come from of the risk of lack of representativeness of the sample. In fact, the books studied are different in scope, tone and language and targeted age and this has influenced their degree of complexity and sophistication and, as a consequence, has created comparability issues across the sample<sup>183</sup>. Also the presence and nature of visuals vary a lot and therefore introduces another element of inhomogeneity. These intrinsic characteristics of the books affect also the representation of consumption activities within them.

Other concerns can be pointed out in relation to the qualitative nature of the study. The research has been conducted alone, and this may have introduced some bias or problems in the recognition of the whole range of themes and codes<sup>184</sup>.

To increase the relevance of the findings, further research should include a larger sample of books, both in terms of number of texts included and breadth of the selection of countries and languages, in order to explore variations in representation of consumption activities across different cultures. An alternative could be to try to select a more homogeneous and specialized sample, for example remaining strictly within a smaller age range, or grouping books by a single genre or theme.

Other interesting developments could be obtained in many ways: as a suggestion, it could be worth relating the choice of the genre to the representation of consumption activity, relating the gender of the author to the way of representing consumption, or verifying a possible temporal evolution of this same representation. Even if it would be difficult, it could be interesting also to organize a longitudinal study in order to verify if the stimuli that facilitate children consumer socialization actually affect their behavior as adult consumers, maybe in relation to some dysfunctional behavioral patterns such as addictions. Finally, this same exploratory study could be conducted taking into consideration other media, conveying messages related to consumption in a more subtle way than advertising, such as animated movies.

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<sup>183</sup> Some of the books in the sample have been found to contain hundreds of consumption activities, while others only some dozens.

<sup>184</sup> The fact that some books are in Italian (and therefore reflect Italian culture) and others have been translated from other languages may also have affected the theme recognition.

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## Appendix A - Books Summary Grid

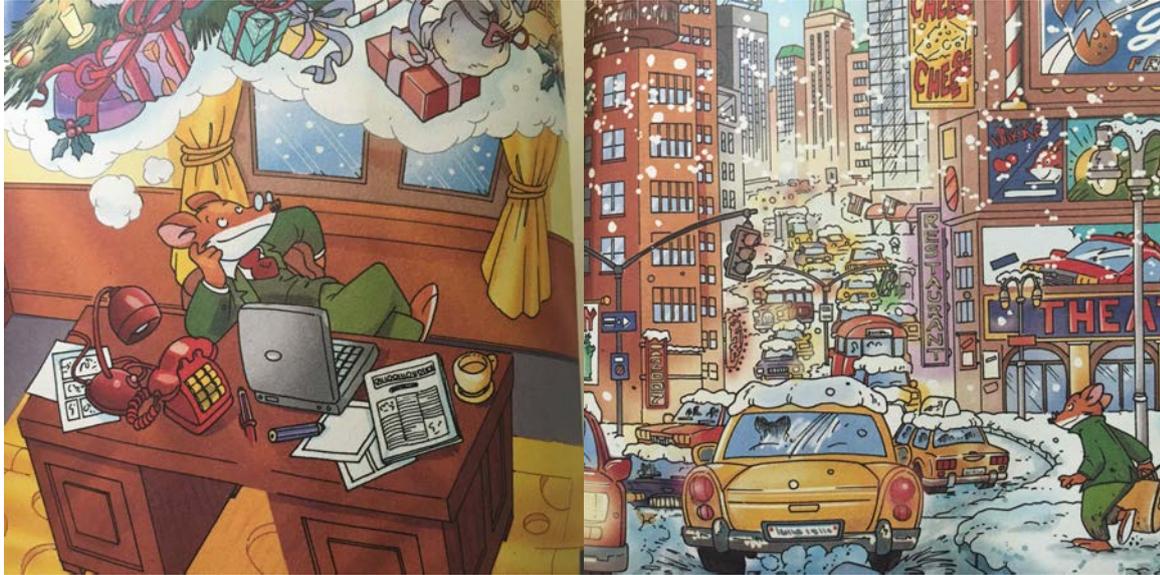
Title	Original Title	Author	Author of Origin	Author gender	Illustrator	Gender of the illustrator	Translator (if translated)	Year of first publication	Publisher	Country of publication	Presence of Visuals	Nature of Visuals	Number of pages
Inseguimento a New York	Inseguimento a New York	Stilton, Geronimo	Italy	M	Ferrario, Giuseppe (cover) Cernuschi, Claudio; Di Dio, Giuseppe; Aliprandi, Christian	M	/	2008	Piemme	Italy	Yes	Color visuals, colored and decorated texts	128
La scatola dei desideri	Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life	Mass, Wendy	US	F	Luciani, Roberto	M	Ragusa, Angela	2006	Piemme (Original Publisher: Little, Brown and Company)	US	Yes	Black and white (rare)	361
Diario di una schiappa: portatemi a casa	Diary of a Wimpy Kid. The Long Haul	Kinney, Jeff	US	M	Kinney, Jeff; Beckerman Chad W. (cover)	M	Bernascone, Rossella	2014	Il Castoro (Original Publisher: Harper Collins)	US	Yes	Black and white (some comics)	217
Frida Kahlo: per bambine e bambini	Frida Kahlo	Fink, Nadia	N.A.	F	Saà, Pitu	M	N.A.	2015	Rapsodia Edizioni (Original Publisher: Chirimbote)		Yes	Color visuals	26
Dov'è Wally?: il viaggio fantastico	Where is Wally? The fantastic journey	Handford, Martin	UK	M	Handford, Martin	M	Le Noël, Edvige	1989	Ippocampo Edizioni (Original Publisher: Walker Books)	UK	Yes	Mostly color visuals	28
Cyberbulli al tappeto: piccolo manuale per l'uso dei social	Cyberbulli al tappeto. Piccolo manuale per l'uso dei social	Benedetti, Teo; Morosinotto, Davide	Italy	M	Vinci, Jean Claudio	M	/	2016	Editoriale Scienza	Italy	Yes	Color visuals	96

## **Appendix B – Book Analysis and Coding Grid**

The grid can be found at the following link:

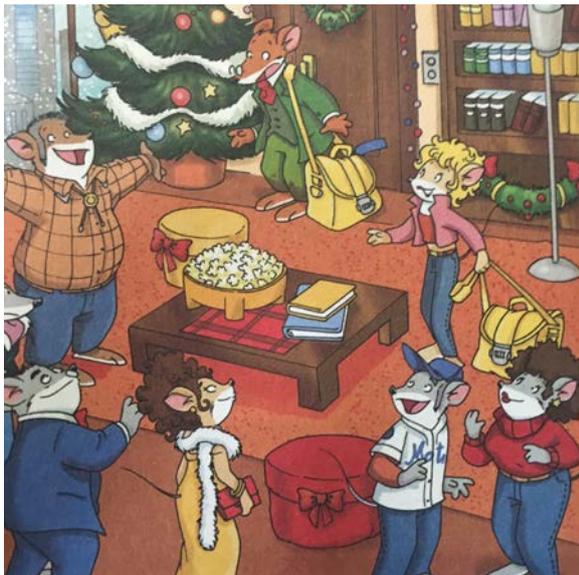
<https://docs.google.com/a/escpeurope.eu/spreadsheets/d/1EOw90w0dRDQBs71IC3YyFE4ucHmSIS2ByxcVwGM7aTc/edit?usp=sharing>

## Appendix C – Illustrations from “Inseguimento a New York”



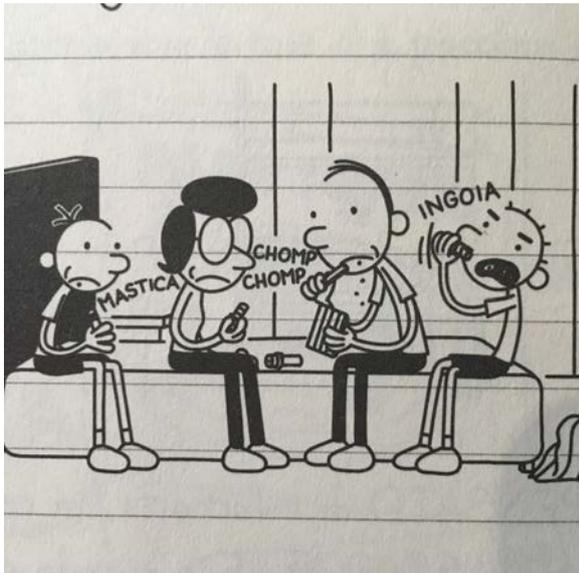
Geronimo and his objects (p. 8)

The streets of New York (p. 49)

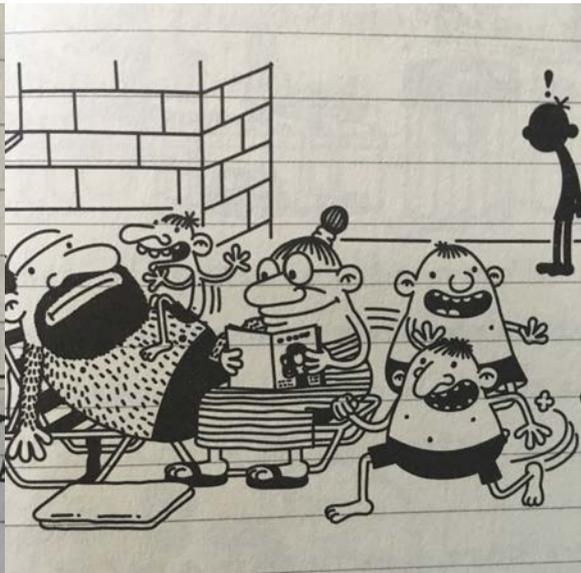


Food as a social activity (p. 101)

## Appendix D – Illustrations from “Diario di una schiappa”



Eating together (p. 66)



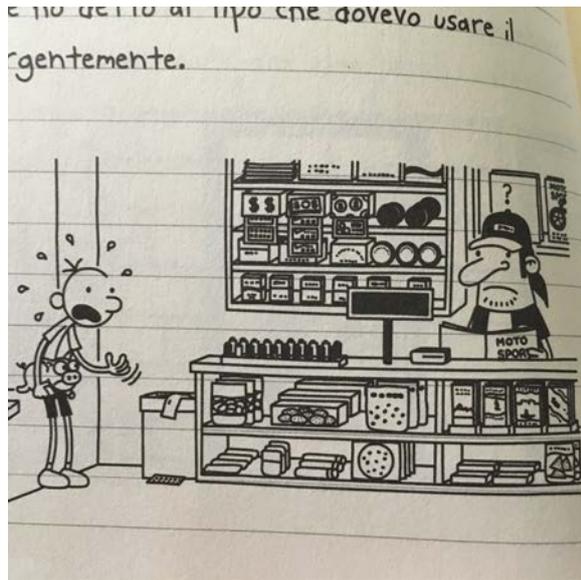
The “antagonist” family (p. 173)



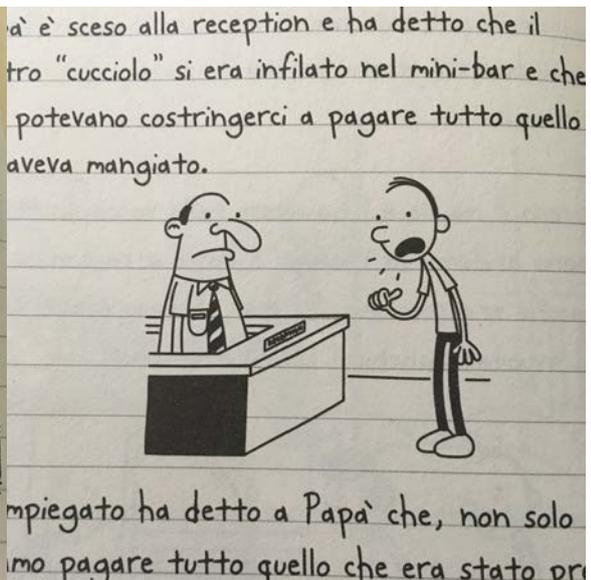
Eating together (p. 140)



Ladri di mutande (p. 48)



Shop (p. 102)



Hotel receptionist (p. 110)

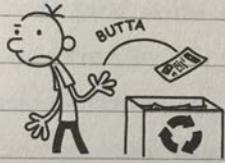


Representation of money (p. 58)



Aunt Stacey (p. 27)

potivo credere di avere scritto con tanto  
a un tipo che mi rispondeva con una pubblicità



se l'esperienza mi ha lasciato l'amaro in  
i suoi libri mi piacciono ancora.

io posso leggere quello che VOGLIO  
state. Rodrick invece deve leggere un

Disposal stage (p. 55)

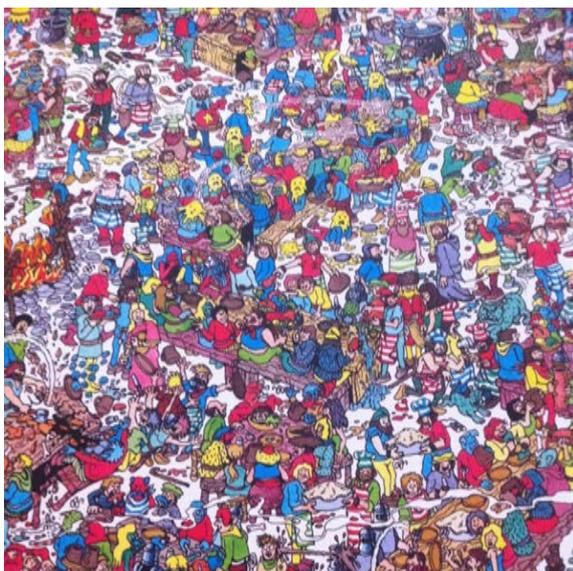
**Appendix E – Illustrations from “Cyberbulli al tappeto”,  
“Frida Kahlo per bambini e bambine”, “Dov’è Wally?”**



Cyberbulli al tappeto – p. 51



Cyberbulli al tappeto – p. 27



Dov’è Wally? – p. 2



Frida Kahlo – p. 26

*This work is dedicated to my friend Chiara and to my parents, who made this year in Paris possible.*