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## The child « in absentia » in furniture retail catalogues

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### **Abstract:**

- Purpose: From an interpretive semiology perspective this paper examines the meaning suggested by the absence of children in newspaper advertisements, commercial websites and catalogue images of children's furniture manufacturers. Its purpose is to highlight the multilayered process involved in conveying meaning to the "parent-child cluster" consumer through press and online advertisements designed by children's furniture manufacturers.
- Design/methodology/approach: A corpus of two hundred press advertisements and catalogues produced by children's furniture manufacturers (particularly IKEA and Gautier) was analysed using a combination of Barthes' (1964) visual analysis and Greimas' (1987) narrative approach to visual discourses.
- Findings: The scenes portrayed to shape the message addressed to the "parent-child cluster" consumer, suggest that, in addition to fostering positive values such as self-fulfilment and stimulating background for an active child, they also promote discourses about contemporary childhood and parenthood.
- Originality/value: This paper highlights how furniture retailers through the figurative choices they make to portray a child bedroom and to organize a series of child bedroom images within a catalogue, generate a brand discourse aiming to typify representations of childhood imbued with diverse cognitive, social and emotional dimensions within diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords**: Interpretive semiology, semiotics of consumption, advertisements, children's bedrooms, furniture manufacturers, retail catalogues.

## **Introduction: Why children are not featured in furniture retail catalogues?**

Whereas press advertisements for toys invariably feature images of their commercial target – children - an analysis of a sample of more than two hundred press advertisements and catalogues produced by children's furniture manufacturers reveals a definite tendency not to feature children in approximately two-thirds of cases.

Considering this apparent paradox, it seemed interesting to examine the motives for such an absence of children in advertisements that promoted goods aimed at them. Was it due to some difficulty in portraying the true nature of the "parent-child cluster" commercial target (De La Ville et al., 2012), or perhaps a desire to internationalize the products on offer so as to be able to translate this same advertisement into different cultural contexts, leaving parents to visualise their own children in the scenes set? Thus, this somewhat weird situation gave us the opportunity to try an initial exploration of the underlying principles that might explain this evident absence of children in the advertisements for bedrooms designed for them.

Thus this study examines, from a figurative perspective, the meaning suggested by this absence of children in newspaper advertisements, commercial websites and catalogue images of children's furniture manufacturers. The purpose is to highlight the multilayered process involved in conveying meaning to the "parent-child cluster" consumer through press and online advertisements designed by children's furniture manufacturers.

### **1 - An interpretive semiology perspective of the visual rhetorics deployed by furniture retail catalogues**

Since the seminal work by Baudrillard (1998), the study of signs has emerged as a major area of investigation in consumer research. Brands were analyzed as mental constructions able to trigger deep emotions and evoke a large array of meanings (Mick, 1986). A particularly dynamic stream of research emerged during the 80's and 90's that promotes a neopositivistic semiotics perspective of marketing communication, based mainly on hypothetico-deductive approaches to test the pragmatic effects of visual rhetorics, i.e. their capacity to transform consumer interpretations and behaviour (McQuarrie and Mick 1999). By contrast, another path of research on visual analysis drew on an abductive inferential process (Peirce, 1978) to shed light on the semiotic rules used to create social meaning in different contexts with the purpose of reaching intermediate levels of generality. As Holbrook and Hirschman state: "*(...) we use the (...) term « semiology » to designate interpretive analysis in general and the interpretation of consumption symbolism and marketing imagery in particular*" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993, p. 232).

In that vein, the purpose of this study about images of furniture catalogues that introduce bedroom ranges aimed at children is to highlight the figurative and thematic levers used to portray "children's bedrooms" for the "parent-child cluster" commercial target. The analysis aims to understand the attempts made by furniture manufacturers to frame and control the social meaning created about a child bedroom. The issue of the reception of this marketing imagery by the "parent-child cluster" consumer is beyond the scope of this study and could be addressed in a subsequent study. From an « interpretive semiology » viewpoint, the research work "*considers the non-artistic artifacts of pop culture or everyday consumption whose multi-*

*level meanings may not be consciously intended to communicate but which nevertheless play that role in society"* (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993, p. 12).

A corpus of 201 press and online advertisements was gathered from different countries: France, Italy, Spain, England, Brazil, etc. The press and online magazines include titles such as Milk, Houzz, House & Garden, Better Homes and Gardens, Marie Claire Maison, Le Mag by Rue du Commerce, Fukurinmon, etc. The paper and online catalogues or websites of furniture manufacturers were examined over 8 years from 2008 to 2016. The children's furniture manufacturers include for instance Conforama, But, Haba, Lagrama, Domio Concept, La Roche Bobois, Pottery Barn Kids, Flexa, The White Company, The children's furniture company, Habitat, IKEA, Vert Baudet, Vibel, Gautier, Maisons du Monde, Loja das Crianças, Bododo, etc. This collection of images was randomly gathered in order to get acquainted with the modes of communication furniture brands mainly use to target the "parent-child cluster" consumer.

Images from	Italy	France	Sweden	England	Brazil	Total
Magazines	8	13	9	9	8	47
Catalogues	29	36	18	15	20	118
Websites	9	9	6	5	7	36
Total	46	58	33	29	35	201

Table 1 –Types of commercial images composing the sample under study

A systematic comparison of all these images showed that children were not featured in two-thirds of the images of kids' bedrooms included in the sample... Is it possible to introduce a child bedroom without portraying a real child using it? What kind of specific values do the children's bedrooms images depict and represent, and how does this story become meaningful to the « parent-child cluster » consumer? The variety brought together by this corpus was sufficient to explore this surprising and puzzling issue of the absence of the child in advertisements for bedrooms that are explicitly intended for him/her.

In the context of this study, the interpretive analysis was developed using a two-step methodology. The analysis relies strictly on visual rhetorics as it appeared that the figurative level was extremely rich in itself to characterise the brand narratives produced about children's bedrooms. As images speak for themselves, the methodology does not develop a multimodal analysis which usually aims to link visual rhetorics to verbal or textual productions through an array of inventive methodologies adapted to the topic under scrutiny (LeVine and Scollon, 2004). Thus, the analysis of the commercial images draws on Martha S. Feldman's fundamental remark: « *A key assumption of semiotics is that surface signs are related to an underlying structure. A related assumption is that there is an underlying structure.* » (Feldman 1994, pp. 21-22). What are the signs used in a commercial image of a child's bedroom to make it meaningful for the « parent-child cluster » consumer? Does the catalogue follow a different underlying structure likely to create another layer of meaning beyond images of bedrooms?

### **1.1 – An initial analysis focused on the meaning the image conveys.**

The first stage of the analysis was inspired by the seminal work conducted Jean Marie Floch (2000, p. 150) who examined the narratives delivered by several images of furniture catalogues. Through narrative semiotics Floch examines the story the image tells the viewer by connecting objects and structuring in practice a « style », i.e. a combination of values including : search for practicality (functional), quest for an optimised offer as far as price and quality are concerned (critical), eagerness to express one's personality and creativity (utopian) and openness to self-indulgence for luxury pieces of furniture and self-gifts that mainly have an aesthetic dimension (ludic).

Thus, using visual social semiotics requires understanding how images tie diverse resources or several signs together to convey social meanings... Claire Harrison recalls that "*an image is not the result of a singular, isolated, creative activity, but it is itself a social process*" (Harrison, 2003, p. 47). This analysis aims to consider the link between children's bedroom furniture and its decoration - that is, the semiotic universe that interweaves functional, aesthetic and economic dimensions to create the meaning that a child's bedroom might have.

From a figurative point of view, each bedroom image is considered as a self-sufficient unit of analysis that can be interpreted *per se* as the result of choices made to convey social meanings about the specificities of its beneficiary : the child. The choices made to connect different elements to create a commercial image of a kid's bedroom express a first level of significance created by the brand in order to suggest a meaning to the « parent-child cluster » consumer.

### **1.2 - A secondary step focused on the brand discourse the catalogue structures.**

The medium used most in the furniture industry is still the catalogue, whether paper or computerized, especially in its dematerialized version on the manufacturer or retailer's website. Therefore, the analysis can no longer deal with just a single image, but rather has to consider a syntagmatic chain of images representing the same commercial object: a child's bedroom.

Pinto Santos emphasizes the complexity of the multi-layered meanings of commercial catalogues : "*A catalogue of a brand is a means of communication and can be regarded as being a referent of a brand, but at the same time one can envisage the catalogue as belonging to the identity of the brand, by presenting layers of signs that consumers can use.*" (Pinto Santos, 2012, p. 103). Indeed, from a methodological standpoint, this structural complexity of the catalogue calls for a complementary narrative analysis taking into account the syntagmatic link created between a series of children's bedroom images. If each image conveys a specific meaning, the reach of the story it tells has to be interpreted in relation to the discourse arranged in the catalogue through the marketing imagery. Rather than simply positioning the product, the arrangement of a series of child bedrooms will also be a part of the message constructed by the brand. The catalogue becomes a picture book for the brand and the worlds it is promoting to tell the consumer another story.

By exploring both the social representations offered by advertisements of children's bedrooms and the more global discursive production organised by the brand through a catalogue, we aim to decipher and illustrate the figurative and thematic principles through

which furniture manufacturers develop their own ideology about contemporary childhood and parenthood to communicate with the « parent-child cluster » target.

## **2 - « Clear-cut images »: featuring portrayals of childhood and its relationship with objects**

The first step in the analysis is to consider the press advertisement or catalogue image as a "true image" as defined by Roland Barthes, namely, what is on view at first glance (such as in a poster, for example). Indeed, the information communicated through commercial photography or images integrate representational and interactive elements to compose a meaningful "whole", ready-to-understand for the consumer (Almeida, 2009, p. 492). Just like an advertising image, the settings laid out in the catalogues can be likened to what Roland Barthes (1964), call the « clear-cut image », that is "an image designed to be understood quickly by the greatest number of people." The images in catalogues are characterized in the form of a "snapshot" highlighting the exemplary and normative character of the living space they represent. They show items effectively that describe their clients, and their aspirations, because their purpose is to attract clients to their shop, or ultimately to instigate an order online or by post.

### **2.1 - The child bedroom at a glance: a selective coupling of furniture and objects**

From a marketing point of view, the census of objects portrayed in catalogues employs a technique used in advertising and merchandising communication. In that perspective, it is necessary to deconstruct the entire image in order to assess how objects are associated or dissociated, that is to say matched or differentiated in "collections" – a unique range created by a brand according to the manufacturers' products and the market position it wishes to target (Barrey et al., 2000; Barrey, 2006).

The overview of the items available in terms of furniture for children can be summed up in the few elements that constitute what manufacturers call the "basic collection", which includes a bed, a bedside table, a desk, a chair and often a wardrobe, though the latter has a tendency to appear less given the layout of contemporary bedrooms. This basic collection – or configuration - appears in almost every image and enables distinctions to be made between "collections" so as to clarify the market positioning of the child bedroom range: entry-level, mid-range or high-end.

However, having analyzed a large sample of commercial images, almost none of them offered only such a limited range as these few proposed elements. In fact, manufacturers create "semiotic worlds" with their commercial settings which enable them to interweave functional, aesthetic and economic dimensions, in order to convey how the child's room should look. Thus, beyond the basic furniture collection, the analysis has also to take into account the « constellation » of items and accessories, and particularly how they work together, which enables the manufacturers to characterise the child bedroom being highlighted. From an analytical point of view, this approach aims to clarify the result of the commercial settings by clarifying the links between objects – configurations or constellations – that structure a child's bedroom.

This fine-grained analytical approach enables us to understand how the child bedroom features different attributes, more or less objective or subjective, but in every case clearly aimed at the “parent-child cluster” consumers so that they can make a choice. Therefore, the furniture collection and “objects constellation” techniques are used in catalogues, press advertisements and posters to convey different “styles” that deal with differences in terms of age, gender and even social status in the way they designate their target. These techniques follow logical marketing segmentation and set out the possible product choices available to the “parent-child cluster” consumer.

The child's bedroom began to appear in homes in the middle of the 19th century in high society circles. This room not only allowed families to limit the territory, the child's range of intervention, differentiating it from the family space, but it was also a way of controlling more effectively disordered, messy, and sometimes unruly activities. From that moment on, the child was able to occupy this place that became, in the works of that time, the setting for his/her fun and creative fantasies. Thus, these pictorial works have shaped the collective imagination of the architecture of childhood on the one hand, and its relation to objects, on the other, thus effectively participating in depicting the material culture of children. Some types of commercial setting replicate a living space that encodes standard systems conforming to the collective imagination built around depictions of the child and his/her relationship with objects deriving from the child's bedroom. These depictions were established in particular through literary and pictorial works, which were devoted to this from the late 18th century and which contributed to making the nursery a symbolic place for the child and his/her relationship with objects, and more generally a place of celebration of his/her material culture.

Even today, the child's bedroom is put together according to a great number of these normative codes. For example, the bedroom for a little girl is presented as highly structured with specific areas: desk, wardrobe, bed, etc.: everything is neat and orderly (Fig. 1). The



Figure 1 - Dolmo Concept 2010

constellation of objects is clearly fully domesticated and no items are left over the floor... This type of representation can be interpreted as an actualized version of the rhetoric presented as early as the nineteenth century, relating to the domestic education of young girls destined to be the guarantors of domestic hygiene and orderly family life including the administration of the family budget and the management of domestic affairs: employees, social activities...

For boys, the bedroom commercial settings refer more to an exterior culture, to various forms of adventure... The enclosed space of the room refers to what is happening outside the home, in the street and in areas to explore and conquer (Figs. 2 and 3). The constellations of objects that characterize a bedroom for a boy include simulations of fighting equipment (swords, knives, arrows, helmets, etc.) and refer to values such as competition, body engagement, courageous behaviours, and precarious issues...



Figure 2 - Robinson Crusoe - Vibel 2011



Figure 3 – Car race Semeo - La Redoute 2016

This depiction of the boys' universe is consistent with the main signs mobilized by brands to express the masculine genre of the user of the bedroom and the values attached to their classical representations of boyhood. Furniture catalogues reproduce the unequal symbolic worlds indicated by Pennell (1994), S. Chaumier (2004) and M. Zegai (2010) in their successive critical analysis dedicated to the inequalities and stereotypes linked to the representations of gender that toy catalogues are still promoting.

Beyond the gender issue, other depictions of children's bedrooms make allusive references to the social class structural divide. In that vein, the Vibel Catalogue or the magazine Milk set styles inspired by the "oriental bazaar" or "bohemian design" (Fig.4 and 5). Drawing on the historical positioning of the brand Vibel – or Habitat - that values the creative bricolage by upper-class parents nurtured with bourgeois culture and furniture design references, these adverts present a wide variety of objects, where the apparent disorder opens up a whole range of possibilities to the consumer who can thus unleash his/her own creativity.



Figure 4 : Gipsy - Vibel 2009



Figure 5 : Milk magazine 2012



As far as its compositional constituents are concerned, the image from Milk magazine, whose upper-class readership is quite similar to the Vibel or Habitat client, presents objects in a carefully organized disordered manner (Badot and Paché, 2007), in an uninterrupted continuity aiming to imply 'abundance'. This apparent disorder makes reference to intimacy, to the private world and personal taste of the child who will live there and of his/her parents. This disorganisation of the constellation of objects brings an opportunity for the "parent-child cluster" consumer to create their own ambiance and express their own creativity. In this scenario, the child is absent from the image because it is up to the « parent-child cluster » consumer to create an environment that suits them by hunting around to acquire different items that will blend best with their domestic environment. This 'bazaar' or 'bohemian' style layout doesn't offer a ready-made bedroom but on the contrary, underlines that the consumer retains control of his/her choices and ownership of items that appeal to him/her in this amalgam of products. The target audience relates more to families from a higher social status category that could be described as "young trendsetters", who are non-conformist and enjoy shopping around.

Paradoxically, the more upmarket the collection on offer becomes, the less its connection with a child's environment is apparent. Conversely, the more upmarket the range or the older the child, the more the product becomes neutral, and accordingly the advertisement that is created for the collection. Therefore, neutralising occurs less from an ideological position than from the possible extension of targets associated with a given product. Several of the layouts examined showed evidence of an attempt to "open up" the interpretation of the product. This can be done simply with the setting. The constellation of objects – moto helmet, laptop and bonsai tree - could just as easily suit an adolescent or a young adult. The equivocity of the objects linked to the bedroom enable the furniture collection to be expanded in order to appeal to a larger consumer target (Fig. 6).



Figure 6 - Tweed – Gautier 2012

## 2.2 - The child bedroom at a glance: a pseudo-reality evoking children's activities

Catalogue images reconstruct ordered or disordered settings, enact more or less explicitly parent/child relationships, etc., and actively contribute to reformulating different themes relating to childhood and to promoting models of contemporary childhood. In order to make sense of the 'moods' being created by the child bedroom images, it seems important to trace the elements within the image that portray the activities that children carry out in their bedrooms.

Roland Barthes subtly observed that such an endeavour in composition leads the viewer to accept as normal a setting full of signs as it "*provides the means of masking a contrived meaning under the guise of the given meaning*" (Barthes, 1964, p. 47). As Roland Barthes suggested, the image has a form of rhetoric, and if photography (used in press advertisements) constitutes a denoted image, it captures a (commercial) setting and transmits a feeling of "having-been-there" to the audience, thus reflecting a pseudo-reality. Indeed, catalogue imagery aims at producing a meaningful picture of "what has just taken place" or "what usually takes place" in the child's bedroom.

There are very strong "child" themes that relate to the intrinsic quality of the product, either in those positioned at entry or mid-range level, or those that indicate a strong positioning in terms of age.

First of all, the young child plays, "making a mess", however in some cases, the bedroom is also the place where he studies (Vaz-Romero Trueba, 2012). Topics such as 'childlike' and 'play' will be expressed through a setting full of primary colours and the adaptable nature of the furniture that can be rearranged or moved according to the playful desires and the activities developed by the child. Toys take a prominent place, and the creative and play dynamic is illustrated by the possibilities the furniture offers to become an evolutive playground for kids (Fig. 7 and 8).



Figure 7 – Creative Play – Ikea 2016



Figure 8 - Calico – Gautier 2011

Some accessories enable the bed and other items of furniture to be transformed into playgrounds, cabins, and then into a desk as the child grows and his/her interests and activities diversify. The thematisation of play enables manufacturers to render the product genderless: the product has no symbolic "selling point", i.e. no "Smallest Common Difference" in the Baudrillard sense (Baudrillard, 1998). Its appeal to both sexes through the furniture system and the primary colours used in each advertisement becomes the sure way to guarantee its commercial "openness". The slogan, which uses the notion of "accessories", then expresses perfectly the multilayering of symbolic tricks on which this method of capturing an audience relies: capitalizing on the abstract term "accessories", the setting pretends to be commendable, even liberal, offering a definition of equality through a system of stereotyped items whose purpose remains anchored in a system of commercial values and responds to the economic and financial challenge of rationalizing production costs (Fig. 8).

As the child develops, its social activities – of which one is 'play' - transform and become explicitly gendered as the peer group deeply influences the choices made by the child...

Illustration 9 features evidence of the passage of a teenager, who threw his jacket on the beanbag and who loves listening to music and playing videogames: a hi-fi system is placed on the desk, and the tablet lays on the bed... The constellation of objects displayed in a relative ambient and deliberately staged disorder (boxing gloves suspended from the bed, rugby balls under stairs) allows us to identify the age of the room user. This staging of an untidy individual is characteristic of a product whose core target group would more likely be a masculine adolescent.



Figure 9. *Le Mag* - Rue du Commerce<sup>1</sup> 2010

In this setting (Fig.10), the colours of the flooring, wallpaper and main furniture are not as loaded with signs of a female to register it as an unambiguous interpretation (red and white are frequently seen as mixed gender colours, multi-coloured dots can, in turn, make reference to early childhood). A certain number of pointers, however, lead us to believe that a teenage girl is the usual occupant. Indeed, the constellation of objects include a computer, books on the shelves, a swivel chair and an open bag placed on the ground made of feminine printed fabric. The fact that it protrudes from a box indicates that it is a personal belonging of the teenage girl living in this bedroom.



Figure 10 – Fukurinmon<sup>2</sup> 2016

We have noted that a majority of the settings merely highlight subjective traces of the status or the activities of the child (clothing and footwear, sports equipment, drawing materials, school stationery and school bags, books, scientific instruments, gendered toys, reading

<sup>1</sup> <http://lemag.rueducommerce.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ado.jpg>

<sup>2</sup> <http://fukurinmon.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/teen-girl-bedroom.jpg>

materials, etc.). Whilst shoes (flat pumps, sandals, but especially tennis shoes and trainers) are markers of approximate age (they generally indicate youth), they prove to be much more effective in indicating gender (including branded shoes selected according to a significant colour or print).

The first step of our analysis reveals that in these clear-cut images that appear to be at the limit of stereotyping, the child is absent, and what remains are only traces of his/her presence. In fact, the photograph reveals “what has been” through what it shows. Thus, an advertisement using this format, shows that a child has been in this bedroom, has stayed there, has slept there, has worked there, and particularly has played there – whether the child is present in the photograph or not. Thus, furniture aimed at children is characterized by the frequency of the thematizations to which they are subject, that is, by their inclusion in fantasies which are relatively alien to the strict grammar of furniture styles.

Although children were not featured in the photographs they were nonetheless present in the bedroom presented, and there were many corroborating indications that contribute to the positioning of the product, both in terms of thematization and determination of sex or age. Indeed, even though the picture of a real child is not used, a great number of signs – a furniture range and a constellation of child’s possessions - are portrayed to convey, in an explicit and unequivocal manner, that the bedroom is actually inhabited either by a young child or a teenager. Thus, the first result of this analysis is that it is quite possible for furniture manufacturers to portray children “*in absentia*” (Eco, 1990) in their commercial communication to interact and create meaning with the “parent-child cluster” consumer.

### **3 – The catalogue imagery: visual brand storytelling to link product ranges and set market positioning**

The semiotic analysis helped to solve the apparent paradox of the absence of the child in most of the bedroom images included in the furniture manufacturer catalogues by revealing how this absence of a real child actually reinforces the perception of children’s past and pseudo-real presence in the settings presented. As Martha S. Feldman states, the primary aim of semiotic analysis is “*to be able to make sense out of phenomena that were previously puzzling or to make new sense out of phenomena that were not previously fully examined.*” (Feldman 1994, p. 30). As a consequence, the analysis needs to move one step further to examine what the role of the furniture catalogue might be in the process of ‘meaning’ creation for the “parent-child cluster” consumer. By considering the catalogue as a meaningful syntagmatic chain of child bedroom images, it is necessary to question the global discourse produced by the brand that generates a more abstract meaning (Greimas 1983 ; Marion 2015) about contemporary childhood.

#### **3.1 – The narrative potential of photography to expose brand expertise about children**

Although the photographic sequence, when it appeared in the 1880s, was primarily used for scientific purposes and served to break down movement, its role has gradually evolved into an exploitation of its chronological structure in journalistic accounts of the « between wars ». It was in the first half of the twentieth century that the narrative skills of photography

were taken into account, as the photographic sequence responded to the need to produce a story. Thus, the photographic series has merely extended the narrative qualities of the “clear-cut image”, and has also permitted a redefinition of photography which was no longer limited just to its sole dimension of a fixed and unique image. This perspective has led to transforming the photographer into a fully-fledged author...

Within the realm of commercial communication, a sequence of images relating to the same furniture collection and the constellation of objects that are linked to it, enables manufacturers, no longer simply to stage the product, but also to tell a story - that of the brand - through the creation of the series. If the style of the catalogue is important to the position that the brand is aiming at for its products, the photographic sequence used in the presentation of the collections will, in turn, help to give them a particular meaning. Furthermore, this presentation format for furniture collections offers a space where the manufacturer can explain more effectively the long term advantages of the product.

In this way, the "parent-child cluster" consumer - the viewer of the catalogue - is firstly required to decrypt a form of writing through the reading of the series in order to seek the meaning conveyed by the set of pictures presented. In order for it to make sense, each image is planned according to space and time, to give an illusion of continuity, necessary to be able to understand the meaning that the collection presented in this way helps to build. This work requires the photographer and the editorial team to think ahead, insofar as the photographic sequence is closely associated with the layout. In this sense, it is a "constructed" photograph. For example, the following series shows how the photographic sequence puts the action at the heart of the collection and in particular reveals the evolving character of the bed (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. « Be-Bop » - Gautier 2013

In this case, the first image is targeting the age and demonstrating the diversity of the product. The second image, meanwhile, presents the evolving scale and modularity of the products in the collection. The principle of narration is similarly found in the following series about which we will go into more detail below (Fig. 12).



Figure 12. « Calypso » collection - Gautier 2013.

The first picture "genders" the product, whilst the following two enable the entire collection to be revealed. The bedroom that is featured here is that of a little boy depicted as well-behaved, consistent with the intended parental target audience. Serialisation enables the different dimensions or options for the same product to be revealed... So the room will be detailed to enable the consumer to imagine the product that will best suit his/her interior decor... and thus begin to appropriate it. The story told is that of a child who grows and flourishes in a bedroom that promotes both the development of his/her talents and his/her amusement.

In this series devoted to a collection for girls aged 6-9 years (Fig. 14), the first image allows us to identify the "gender" of the collection through the items and colours that are featured: pastel tones, purple, flowers, boots, a little girl's outfit, soft toys on the bed and on the shelf, jewellery box on the dressing table. The story told is that of a "perfect little girl", tidy and evolving in a "cute", sweet and sugary world filled with objects representative of « sweetness », such as cuddly toys and flowers. The world of the little girl is somewhat saturated with softness. It is associated



Figure 13. « Lola » collection - Gautier 2013

with the ever present cuddly toys, soft cushions and beige and lilac shades. The mirror also holds a prominent place in this room as an archetypal accessory of femininity. This association is regularly updated and confirmed: unlike boys, girls are frequently represented using mirrors. The second image in the series focuses less on objects characteristic of gender: here are presented the other products which make up the collection. The little girl has grown up, she has become organised and studious, whilst still having "good taste".

The catalogue introduces the "parent-child cluster" consumer to the concept of a space suited to contemporary childhood that characterizes the technical and symbolic choices made in the setting of each bedroom presented. The succession of clear-cut images that the catalogue illustrates enables the "storytelling" of the brand to occur visually (Salmon, 2007). This storytelling is an essential part of the positioning of the brand that highlights the distinguishing features that set the brand apart from its competitors and makes it appealing to the "parent-child cluster" consumer. Indeed, the storytelling of furniture brands emphasises the child expertise the manufacturer has developed while taking into account different parental concerns such as quality, durability and price constraints.

### **3.2 - The effect of serialisation: deciphering an underlying ideological structure...**

The narrative dimension of the photographic sequence appears to be widely exploited and particularly in the catalogues of furniture manufacturers. It reinforces the narrative of brands, offering a whole fantasy and symbolism in which the consumer can imagine himself (Greimas, 1987).

Indeed, putting side-by-side fixed images taken sequentially, blends the sequence and shows the progress of a movement or an event depicted through several stasis. However, it is only an illusion of continuity, in time and space brought to the collection. Indeed, since there remains a stop time which is out of the photographer's will and control, the serial syntax is elliptical by nature. In grammar, the ellipse is a stylistic method which consists of omitting one or more elements voluntarily knowing that the recipient will naturally fill in the blanks left by this omission, so that the sentence will achieve its meaningfulness for the reader. In this case, the reader confronted by this, just like a reader of images in a series, implements what Ernst Gombrich defined as a tendency to completion: "*Considered by the author as the very foundation of visual perception, this completion principle leads the viewer naturally to fill in the gaps between images, by referring to an imaginary continuity.*" (Gombrich, 2000, p. 64).

Thus, the photographic series helps to give meaning through the absences revealed, in short, what the photographer brings to the fore, or more precisely what the reader or the target consumer wants to see. Rosalind Krauss recalls from her point of view, that: "*We are not looking at reality, but a world contaminated by interpretation and meaning, that is to say, a reality dilated by voids and blanks which constitute the formal conditions preceding the existence of the sign [...] The photography is used here to produce a paradox: that of reality consisting of signs, or even of presence transformed into absence, in representation, in spacing, in writing.*" (Krauss, 1990, p. 114).

From an interpretive semiology perspective, serialisation constitutes a complex narrative process that can enable manufacturers to tell a common story for the different settings, that is to say, the story of the brand and the symbolic and technical territory it embraces.

As a furniture manufacturer and retailer, the Ikea brand promotes the catalogue as its main means of communication by posting 220 million catalogues per year through letter boxes all over the world<sup>3</sup>... The content of the catalogue expresses the degree of brand internalisation achieved by the marketing and retail teams across national borders within this global corporation (Tarnovskaya and De Chernatony, 2011). The principles of « The Ikea Way » are applied under strict corporate control to ensure that the image of the brand is locally consistent in every store all over the world and supports the brand-activating global strategy. In the Ikea catalogue index, no specific section is devoted to children’s bedrooms and they blend into the nocturnal world of the home. This corresponds to the positioning of the brand which favours the everyday well-being and especially the « well-living » in the home, passing through a hedonistic dimension that infuses family life. Thus, the first child's bedroom, shown below, is found placed between a bedroom for an adult and one for a teenager (Fig. 10).



Figure 14. Child’s bedroom – Ikea 2013

Therefore, the way in which this series is organized allows us to think that it aims more to display joint creative activities with adults and joint fun activities with peers as a means of understanding the entire range of children's bedrooms that constitutes the territory in which the brand has invested. We can infer that what is promoted through this series is a space for communication, creativity and games which serves incidentally as a place for the child to sleep. Thus, the bedroom is not only just a place to sleep but rather a place to live and in which to take pleasure through shared activities with family or friends: it is a place where the child discovers his/her talents and where his/her personality blossoms.

<sup>3</sup> According to Laure Bélot, the IKEA catalogue is the most widely distributed publication in the world after the Bible and the Little Red Book, in « Ikea, la mondialisation vue de l’intérieur », *Le Magazine du Monde*, 27 July 2013, pp. 21-27.



In contrast with Ikea, the Gautier catalogue devotes an entire section to children's bedrooms. This reflects the history of the company that specialised in children's furniture when it was founded in 1949, but also the new strategy of the company that wishes to attract the teenager target market with new collections. Therefore, the "child" section of the catalogue index begins by presenting the different collections for teenagers before moving on to the children's collections and concluding with the highly themed collections. Through the active brand storytelling the catalogue portrays different visions of childhood, either by offering a depiction of the online, active, technologically 'savvy', and 'cool' child, or by actualizing some mythical structures about the 'cute', innocent, good and sometimes roguish child in need of adult protection (Cross, 2004).

As we see in the two catalogues of Ikea and Gautier, through serialisation, the catalogue organizes a syntagmatic chain of significance between images dealing with the same object or event: a child's bedroom. Marketing imagery enacts the brand "storytelling" (Salmon, 2007), a visual discourse infused with emotions and values, not only about « children's lives» but also about what "modern parental caring" should be... The brand storytelling created in the catalogue aims to show that it is possible for a parent to be a caring parent by participating in the creation of a specific material space – the bedroom - to allow the personality of the child to blossom...

Whilst at first glance the "clear-cut image" has the objective of revealing to the audience the consistency of what is on view, the effect of serialisation does not appear to work on the same level. Indeed, the polysemic notion of "presence" means first « the fact of being present *hic et nunc*, of being in a place », but also « to be present in spirit or in awareness » (Parret, 2002). As proven by visual rhetoric analysis theory, representations are never innocent and they are very closely connected to systems of power in society. In his artistic approach to photography and critical perspective about media information, Bruno Serralongue points out that organising a series of images consists of creating an exhibition whose framing preconceptions and power biases should be actively questioned by the audience (Serralongue, 2014).

Drawing on the pseudo-presence of the child and on the serialisation the catalogue builds, the global reach of the brand contributes to increase the awareness of some aspects of "modern childhood". The catalogue designed as a picture book telling the brand story to the "parent-child cluster" consumer conveys specific values: the material well-being that a modern child deserves. Indeed, through their catalogues, intended for an international or global audience, the Gautier and IKEA corporations, each in its own way, presents the specific concept of the material well-being of an imaginary child: a global and urban child whose needs for fulfillment are presented as being similar across the globe and towards whom children's product manufacturers aim (Steinberg, 2011). The presence of this commodified vision of the material well-being of the child as a condition for the development of its personality potential is nurtured by several forms of textual and visual discourses, apart from the catalogue or the brand website, such as statements at corporate level, interactive communication on the blogosphere and social networks, multichannel promotional actions, etc. (LeVine and Scollon, 2004). This commodified vision of material child well-being and the set of social norms it involves with regard to « good-enough parenting », is partly imposed on the « parent-child cluster » consumer by the marketing imagery created by furniture manufacturers.

## **Conclusion: A commodified global childhood imbued with imagination, social norms and domination structures**

From a semiotics perspective, brands interweave a complex and dynamic net of signs through which they have the ability to generate continuously new social meanings. According to Holbrook and Hirschman, interpretive semiology of marketing practices - including the symbolic meanings of goods and the commercial settings organized by marketing imagery, brings crucial insights in understanding the evolving meaning of everyday cultural products such as children's bedrooms (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993, p. 58).

The way children's rooms are portrayed by furniture manufacturers in retail catalogues appears to be a particularly rich semiotic subject as they accumulate and condense a number of key dimensions about how the links between childhood and global markets are interwoven. This research reveals that furniture manufacturers build significant differences between the ranges they address to the "parent-child cluster" consumer by evoking, depicting and opposing a variety of imaginary children and normative childhoods... By the marketing techniques they employ, the distribution professionals not only instigate and accompany the transformation of the activities led by the children in their bedrooms but also actively participate in the diverse evolving and emergent meanings this specific space might have within the family house.

Children's rooms appear to be a rich subject for interpretive semiology as they reveal that the figure of the child and the definition of childhood in post-modern societies are at least partly, and in some cases mainly, built by business circles and marketing professionals. Corporations take an active part in the progressive enactment of a "global child", a global commercial target that embodies the moral and political debates inherent in a conjunction of the terms "globalization" and "childhood" (Langer, 2004). Commercial realms include an ideological domination of the consumer whose complexity has been highlighted by Michel de Certeau as, on the one hand, consuming entails a form of acceptance of an imposed offer of goods and values, while on the other, consumers are neither passive nor docile, they experience freedom, creativity and pleasure... (De Certeau, 1984).

As Martha Feldman recalls: *"It bears repeating that the semiotic analysis did not lead me to discover facts that I did not already know. It did something much more important however. It lead me to consider relationships that I had not previously acknowledged."* (Feldman 1994, p. 30). In that sense, the importance of marketing imagery as a body of social, historical and cultural knowledge, that has the ideological power of transforming the social meaning of childhood remains still largely under-investigated (James and Prout, 1997).

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