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### ► To cite this version:

Valérie-Inès de La Ville, Nathalie Nicol. Shopping from a child's perspective: an anxiety-generating experience?. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, 2019, Kids and retailing: wellbeing of the child, 47 (6), pp.680-698. 10.1108/IJRDM-09-2017-0210 . hal-02163465

**HAL Id: hal-02163465**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02163465>**

Submitted on 13 Apr 2023

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# Shopping from a child's perspective: an anxiety-generating experience?

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## **Structured Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of this communication is to give some insights about how the children, aged between 4 and 12, live their shopping experiences. The research enables us to reveal the 'shopscares' of young consumers.

**Design / Methodology / Approach:** Built on a comprehensive approach, our research is based on data collected from 15 pairs of siblings during interviews where the children collectively produced a drawing of a shop they chose. The drawing was a support for the verbal exchange and doing it in pairs encourages each child to clarify his or her intentions about the drawing.

**Findings:** In this paper, by developing four arguments, we demonstrate that shopping is an anxiety-generating experience when children are concerned.

**Research limitations / implications:** Our data were collected among children who were asked about the buying of a present for a friend's birthday. Children have consequently given information about mainly toy's stores.

**Practical implications:** There are great opportunities for retailers to modify this feeling by welcoming children in the stores and enhancing them to behave as consumers.

**Social implications:** There could be opportunities for retailers to invest the consumption education area.

**Original / Value:** Our research is child-centered and thanks to the concept of shopscares, we reveal new and surprising insights about children's shopping experiences.

Because of their increasing spending power, children are targeted by retailers who consider them as a new way to enlarge their existing markets. Children are in the stores from their youngest age, with their parents, with friends, ... or alone sometimes. The first research conducted about children as consumers have focused on the products bought by children, their preferred stores, their influence on the family's buying and the skills they have to master to become competent consumers (McNeal, 1964, 1987, 1992 ; Wells and La Sciuto, 1966 ; Fady, 1979 ; Reece, 1986 ; Brée, 1993 ; Acuff, 1997 ; McNeal et al., 1998 ; Roedder-John, 1999 ; Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001 ; Ozgen, 2003 ; Chan, 2005 ; ...). The aim of our research is about understanding how children, from their point of view, live their shopping experience.

In the first part, we present the academic literature about children in the retail areas. Some insights are given and but doesn't help us to understand what is the experience lived by children when they are shopping. That's why we have to build a new way of approaching the shopping experience lived by children. We present this concept and our methodology in a second part. We gained very rich and strong data about children in the stores. We discuss in this paper the sole results we had about anxiety felt by children while shopping.

## **Children in the stores:**

Children accompany their relatives in the stores and start to behave on the market from their youngest age. In their research, Dely-Gray *et al.* (2016) show how young children, aged between 3 and 6, are very active and involved in their parents' shopping process and that they appreciate this shared activity. Children consequently gain information during their visits about the store and its features, the products and the brands, the packaging, the store's layout. Throughout observation and participation in the buying process, they develop their consumer skills (McNeal, 1992; Roedder-John, 2001) and become more and more competent as consumers. The stores can then be seen as places and spaces that contribute to the socialization of the children into consumers.

Kids have positive feelings about retailers and shops they perceive as “*warehouses of satisfactions*” (McNeal, 1992, p. 108) where a lot of products are available for buying and where children can discover new brands and new products. The profusion of goods can arouse children's envy and drive them to adopt negative behaviors called pester power such as crying and nagging (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001; Nash and Basini, 2012). Valkenburg and Cantor (2001) show that 70% of the parents of 5-years-olds children have experienced those negative behaviors while shopping with their children. Ayadi and Cao (2016) explain that the hedonic dimensions of a store can enhance conflicts between children and parents because children will be tempted to play and explore the store and won't be as much cooperative as in a more basic store.

To help the parents to manage these situations, retailers can offer edutainment activities (Feenstra *et al.*, 2015, p. 48), which can be defined as places where children can play and learn throughout activities (workshops where they can create, customize products and cook, birthday parties and events organized by brands) while their parents are shopping. Andrieu *et al.* (2004) explain how the West Edmonton Mall propose to the customers many playgrounds and activities for their children, in order to make customers feel free in the mall, free to walk around and to buy whatever they want. It is a kind of “*social contract*” between the mall, the

retailers and the customers (Andrieu et al, 2004, p. 41), because children can be seen as well as barriers as incentives during shopping (Héliès-Hassid, 2007).

As stores can be seen as spaces conceived and designed by adults and for adults (De La Ville and Drevet, 2010), children try to re-appropriate the commercial spaces by giving them new meanings (Ironico, 2012). Through games but also through the products and the commercial stimuli, children assign to the stores new features. Because they are creative and thanks to their physical capabilities, they access to spaces which are not conventionally reachable such as windows or cash desk. The space offered by the stores are negotiated by the children as space they can discover and where they can play. To Ironico (2012), this kind of behaviors is also a way for the children to get socialized in the stores because it contributes to enhance the children's familiarity of the stores.

Children have a spending power through their pocket money; they can influence the choice of a product or of a brand and they represent for the retailers, their future customers (McNeal, 1992). If stores and retailers are familiar to the children, even to the youngest of them, there is a need for both academic researchers and retailers, to understand how the children live their shopping experiences.

### Methodology of the research:

To gain access to and to grasp children's shopping experiences, it is crucial for researchers to put them at the center of the research, by considering them as valid informants who create the research with the researcher (Christensen and Prout, 2002). In our research, we wanted to have a deep child-centric approach to hear children's voices (Banister and Booth, 2005; Ezan, 2013). This approach can challenge the researcher and consequently, the researcher has to anticipate about the relationship to establish with the children. This question can't be avoided by the researcher who intends to gain access to the childish cultures, to hear the children's voices and to reduce (ideally to cancel) the power balance between the researcher and the children. Consequently, we enhance to develop a positive and friendly relationship (Fine and Sandström, 1988) with the children and to exchange with them in a collaborative and trustful manner. As suggests Raffety (2014), we consider ourselves as a "cultural novice" and try to reduce the cultural distance the children and us.

Our research develops the concept of '*shopsapes*' as a conceptual tool to understand children's experience of shopping. Based on the '*scapes*' (Appadurai, 1996), the '*foodscapes*' (Brembeck and Johansson, 2010 ; Wenzer, 2010) and the French Theory (Deleuze et Guattari, 1980 ; Deleuze, 1993), the '*shopsapes*' are the imaginary geographies each person or group of people builds based on his or her daily experiences and practices with reference to retail environments and activities (Nicol, 2014). By definition, '*shopsapes*' are built unconsciously by each person, are dynamic and culturally grounded.

Therefore, the researcher has to design innovative methodologies to collect the data to enable the non-verbal techniques to transcend the verbal and adult-centric techniques (Corsaro, 2011; Robinson and Gillies, 2012). Punch (2002) also recommends to use techniques that are specific to children, such as drawing (Ezan *et al.*, 2015). Child-centered-techniques encourage the children to share their own images and representations they built about their lives and experiences (Corsaro, 2011).

Built on a comprehensive approach, our research is based on data collected from 15 pairs of children during interviews where children draw a store they chose. Children were proposed a script about the buying of a birthday present for a friend of them. Working in pairs, with a child older than the second one, allows us the work in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1934, 1962, 1978) and requires the two children exchange verbally and explicit their intentions during the shared drawing activity (Bodrova and Leong, 2011). The researcher consequently collects rich and fruitful data during (1) the exchange between the two children and (2) the exchange between the children and her.

To have pairs of children, with one older than the other, the first pairs of children we interviewed was constituted of siblings. We saw that facing siblings really reduce the power balance: the researcher is alone and facing two children who well know each other and get on well when facing someone they do not know. We consequently decide to collect our data exclusively among siblings.

In our research, drawing is an excuse to make children speak about their shopping activities and experiences. The drawing has the advantage of structuring the verbal exchange and to get the children focused on the activity (Yuen, 2004). Drawing in a group of two is moreover a way to renew the activity (Bodrova and Leong, 2011). Upon the typology of drawing proposed by Ezan *et al.* (2015), the oriented-drawing was chosen to give the children more freedom in their drawing: organization of the drawing, viewpoint, type, size and name of the store... When collecting data *via* oriented drawings, the number of drawings is reduced and the presence of the researcher during the drawing activity is required in order to have a real verbal exchange with the informants.

All the interviews were written down and the comparison between all of all them was the key to get the meanings children attribute to their shopping experiences. As the drawing activity was just an alibi and as it is a very risky activity to interpret, the drawing itself has not been analyzed. Cambier (2000) warns the researchers using drawing to collect data with children, about the risk to consider the drawing as an autonomous object, independent from the context where it has been produced. She argues that the circumstances in which the drawing was realized and the process which conducted the children to draw, have to be taken into consideration when analyzing.

The 15 shopping experiences the children we met let us discover, happen in different kind of stores: 10 big toys stores with national or international brand-names, 2 supermarkets, 1 sport items store, 1 bazaar and 1 bookshop.

## Findings:

The interviews realized with the children shows that children integrate in their '*shopscales*' four components as specific parts of the imaginary geographies they develop about stores and retail.

### *The thieves are in the place:*

In the stores described by the children, there are thieves whose intention is to take away some products of the store without paying them: "*thieves*" "*the bad*", "*the bandit*".

And some children can give a lot of details about this phenomenon: they know that valuable products and expensive ones can attract thieves.

Arnaud (boy – 7 years old): *You know, the ones who steal items because they are valuable...they take the goods and run away!*

Marin (boy – 6 years old): *And now I'm going to draw another thiefe!*

**Table 2: The thief is arriving to the store; he is on the parking but a policewoman has noticed his presence:**



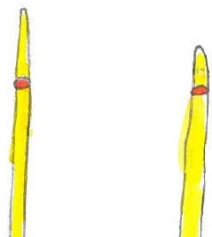
Marin (boy – 6 years old): *She is watching the entrance. No she is a policewoman!*

Researcher: *And what is the policewoman doing at the entrance of the shop?*

Marin (boy – 6 years old): *Because in fact, she is watching when the shop is about to close. Then if thieves are searching for... want to steal toys...She can see them in 5 minutes! From the end of the corridor, she has a spyglass, binoculars...then she looks and she can see the thieves immediately!*

Children know that the stores try to face this threat. Therefore, the stores have many solutions at their disposal and children can describe those solutions: the presence of security guards, the use of antennas and of close-circuit cameras. They explain how those solutions operate: the antenna can ring when a product is stolen, the security guard can check the customer's bag or look on the screen the images of the CCTV. They show a real consciousness of the technical and human solutions in the shop to prevent theft. For the children, it is a part of the store as well as the products or the tills. They are very familiar with this equipment and have internalized its presence in the stores.

**Table 2: Antitheft Antennas in the shop (Extracts from interview and drawing N° 2)**

Interview:	Drawing :
<p>Marie (girl – 9 years old – looking at what her younger sister is drawing): <i>What is that?</i></p> <p>Louise (girl – 4 years old): <i>But you know...it's when there is a thief, well, you can hear « beep beep ».</i></p> <p>Marie (girl – 9 years old): <i>Thieves?</i></p> <p>Louise (girl – 4 years old): <i>Yes, if there are thieves!</i></p>	

Louise (girl – 4 years old): *But you know, it's when there is a thief, and well you can hear "beep beep"*

Mathilde (girl – 12 years old): *Oh he is watching the entrance!*

Researcher: *So he is watching the entrance...*

Mathilde (girl – 12 years old): *In case there are some thefts maybe. In case people open the... How can I say? The boxes?*

Amélie (girl – 10 years old): *And then, there is something here but there is often a man just here...*

Researcher: *There is a man... What is he doing?*





Amélie (girl – 10 years old): *He is watching the entrance and the exit.*

Arnaud (boy – 7 years old): *... And also the camera. In fact, she is filming the people to check there is no bandit.*

**A specific behavior is expected from children in the store:**

Children also demonstrate how well they have integrated that a specific behavior is expected when they entered a store. The entrance of the stores very often materialized by a fence on which there is a no-entry way (See Table 3). This equipment acts as a cognitive and technical discrimination and conveys the idea of control and interdiction (Cochoy, 2008). It is an incentive to behave in the appropriate manner.

***Table 3: Fences at the entrance of the shops***

<p>Isabelle (girl – 8 years old) Marc ( boy – 6 years old)</p>	
<p>Hector (boy – 8 years old) Marin (boy – 6 years old).</p>	
<p>Pierre (boy – 8 years old) Anna (girl – 6 years old)</p>	
<p>Eloïse (girl – 12 years old) Alix (girl – 8 years old)</p>	

If children do not behave in the appropriate and expected manner within the shop, they know that the security guards can warn them. They remember situations where being warned or situations where they know that the security guards are busy and cannot see them (for instance in a store where security guards mainly stay on the ground floor and children can play hide-and-seek on the first floor).

Mathilde (girl – 12 years old – remembering a shopping trip with her mummy and they didn't find in the store the product they were looking for): *So we wanted to get out of the store. And it was forbidden. So we say 'no worry, we go where there are fences'. And then a man came to us and says we were not allowed to go that way. So mummy got angry and said 'I'm fed up with the obligation of going that way...'. And then, the security guard let us go...*



Amélie (girl – 10 years old): *In fact, upstairs, we have fun. We are playing a sort of hide-and-peek; it's too funny!*

Researcher: *You are playing hide-and-peek in the garments?*

Amélie (girl – 10 years old): *Yes*

Marine (girl – 8 years old): *And what is nice, it's that the guard men don't come very often upstairs! So it's easy!*

Amélie (girl – 10 years old): *There is only one and he is watching the entrance*

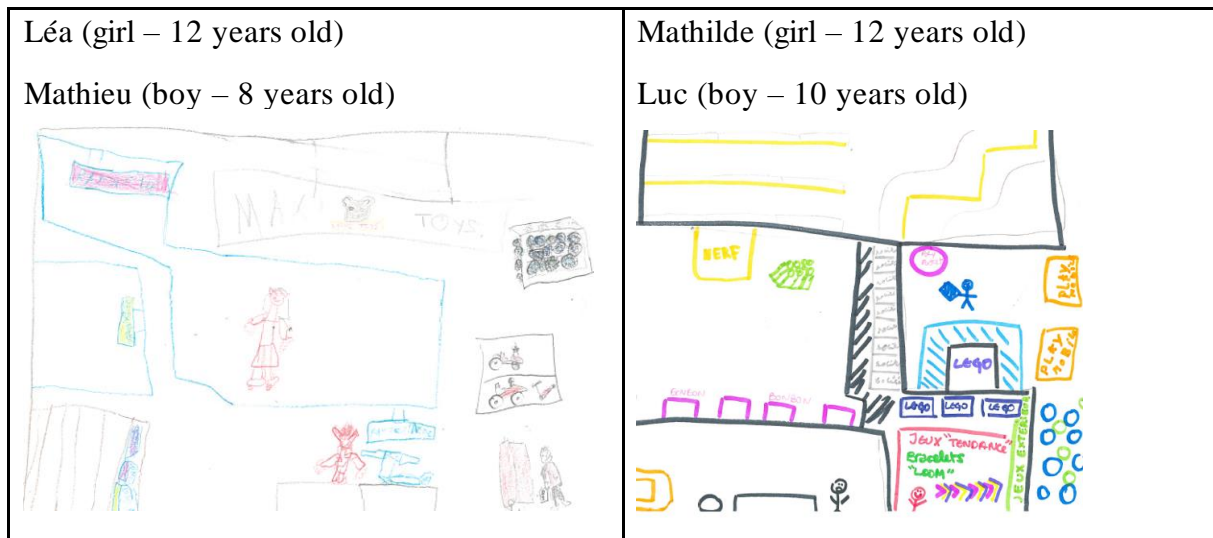
Marine (girl – 8 years old): *And sometimes there is one walking around. But just one. Once, one of them came and told: "hey girls, stop playing!"*

All the fences at the entrance and the exit of the store are a way to channel the customers in the store but also to direct their behaviors. Going through the entrance fence of a store implies for the children the acceptance that a specific behavior is expected from them. There are lots of rules to respect when shopping in a store: to be polite, to pay the items, to respect the fence and the flows...

*A labyrinth where you can easily get lost:*

The children also describe the stores as a labyrinth where it seems easy to get lost. The shelves and the aisles organize a kind of maze customers have to go through in order to discover the store's offer. Children have stated that risk during the interviews but also in their drawings (see Tables 4 and 5).

**Table 4 : Stores as labyrinths**



Marc (boy – 6 years old): *And then the third, there is something with car and circuits. And then the fourth first, well there are spinning-tops.*

Marine (girl – 8 years old): *Oh yes... it's like this, it's true. Sorry, I get lost.*

Mathilde (girl – 12 years old): *We are going to draw a labyrinth I believe...*

Mathilde (girl – 12 years old): *I really find that those stores are a kind of labyrinth. To get to this point, we have to go around the whole store*

Fear of getting lost is really present during some interviews. All the stores drawn by the children are quite big. Even the bookshop is a 4-floor building. And two children have drawn the welcome desk where someone can be called if you get lost in the store (see Table 5). Stores are considered as dangerous places for children (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 11), where their primary evil-instincts are reactivated. Children are tempted to disobey to their parents when they are shopping together. Are they tempted to explore the store by themselves? Consequently, they can get lost...

**Table 5: Calling at the welcome desk**



Children's books reinforce the risk of getting lost in a store. The theme of children lost in stores is often concerned in children's books. Children's books about children getting lost always take place in stores (see Table 6). In their research in 2016 about representations of shopping in the children's books, Badot *et al.* show that large stores are described and presented to the children as "*places of stress and distress*" (p. 982) where children can encounter dangers among which the risk of getting lost or the risk of being separated from their parents.

**Table 6: Some children's books about getting lost in a store**

<p>de Saint Mars D. et Bloch S. (2004), <i>Max et Lili se sont perdus</i>, Editions Alligram.</p> 	<p>Max et Lili ont perdu leur maman dans un grand magasin. Lili a la bonne réflexe de revenir à l'endroit où ils se sont séparés mais Max n'en fait qu'à sa tête. Une histoire de <b>Max et Lili</b> pour parler de la peur de <b>se perdre</b> dans la ville, pour apprendre à être organisé, attentif, et savoir qu'on peut facilement se faire aider sans craquer, par les commerçants, par exemple, ou les gardiens de la paix.</p> <p>Max et Lili have lost their gran-mother in a department store; Hopefully Lili has the idea to go back to the point when they get separated...but Max doesn't want to follow to sister...</p>
<p>Gillot L. et Durbiana L. (2014), <i>Lulu-Grenadine se perd dans un grand magasin</i>, Editions Nathan.</p> 	<p>Lulu-Grenadine is having fun in the department store. But, suddenly, she cannot see her mother! <b>MUMMYYYYYY !</b></p>
<p>Le Masne C. et Bawin M.A. (1998). <i>Tom est perdu</i>. Editions Mango.</p> 	<p>Today, Tom goes to shop with her mother. In the department store, there are a lot of people and lots of products to look at. Tom has an obsession: find the new trousers he wants. But when he turns around, her mother is no more closed to him. He runs in all the department store. Her mother has disappeared! Tom is lost and is really afraid among all those unknown people...</p>
<p>Cau V., Phipson J et Kiefé L. (2013), <i>Une nuit au grand magasin</i>, Editions Bayard Jeunesse.</p> 	<p>Beatrice and Michel hate department stores. Today, while they go to the bathroom, Mummy and Daddy have disappeared! Where are they? Beatrice and Michel try to join the exit but they arrive too late: the store is closed. The lights are turned off and there is nobody in the store. They are prisoners...</p>

**The absence of contact with people:**

In their 'shopsapes', the children we met describe that customers are also present in the stores. Among these customers, friends of them can also be shopping in the same store. Concerning the staff working in the store, the children identify easily the checkout assistants. Paying the product they have chosen is an obligation and consequently, unless of a self-checkout-system, the children have to interact with the checkout assistants. Except this category of staff, children have hardly been in position of giving information about sales assistants. Some children even consider there is no sales assistant in the stores.

Researcher: *Is there staff working in the store?*

Jules (boy – 5 years old): *No.*

Children, when shopping interact with the checkout assistants and have noticed the presence of the security guards. But they have not noticed any sales assistant in the store. We conclude that this situation is the consequence of a lack of interaction between children and sales assistants. Children are invisible for the retailer's staff and maybe, for the retailers also. Are sales assistants trained to discuss, to interact and to help children when they are shopping? This absence of link and of interaction could lead to reinforce the feeling of anxiety felt by children when they are in stores. The stores are big and there is nobody to help them or to take care of them.

### Discussion:

Shopping, as far as children are concerned, is an activity where people can get lost in the stores, where children can meet thieves but no sales assistant and where a certain kind of behaviour is expected by the store in order to consider the child as a "normal" shopper. Retail environments express moral injunctions to children in order them to adopt an appropriate behaviour in the stores and especially to prevent them from shoplifting. Shopping in these conditions is an anxiety-generating experience for children. Shops try to « discipline », in Foucault (1975) acceptance, the young shoppers and stores become micro-institutions of power (Foucault, 1975) by editing norms of behaviours and demanding people to adopt them.

It seems that children when shopping are exploring a potentially dangerous and mysterious space. They are like explorers who are discovering a new land, following Cochoy's comparison, where the market is a new land to discover and the shopper, a traveller discovering a new space (Cochoy, 2002, p. 5).

Can a child learn to become a consumer when acting in such a stressful environment? How could the retailers welcome the children and offer them the conditions to learn to become a consumer?

Shops are conceived by and made for adults (De La Ville and Drevet, 2010) and as Cook (2003) argues, it is retailer's responsibilities to adopt the child perspective (*'pediocularity'*) and to see and examine the stores with children's eyes. It's not only a matter of edutainment activities (Feenstra *et al.*, 2015) proposed to the children to get them busy whilst their parents are shopping; it's about allowing the children to act, to behave as a creative consumer in the retail areas and to make then possible the stores become appropriated by the children. Through events and specific displays, the stores can offer to children an opportunity of acting and then to get appropriated by the children. Through awareness campaign and maybe specific trainings, the store's staff can participate actively in better welcoming children by considering children and recognizing them as valuable consumers.

To reinforce a child-centric culture, retailers could become partners in the consumption education programs as Drasigh (2004) describes. The mission of the Italian cooperative system 'Coop' is to help people to understand the "*rules in the merchant world*" (Drasigh, 2004, p. 199). The cooperative system has not only commercial and financial objectives; it

promotes responsibility, solidarity and transparency. In the Italian 'Coop', those values are implemented in a program to help the teachers to teach consumption to children. The retailer offers its shops as real playgrounds where children can discover, learn and experiment consumption. The retailer also proposes its expertise to the teachers and has developed programs teachers can choose, to deploy all the skills children need to master to become consumers that are more competent. The retailer become then a real and engaged partner in training children to consumption.

Even if our research is much contextualized (children were in the situation of buying a birthday present for a friend of them and most of the situations they described and drawn happened in toys' stores), our data reveal that shopping is for children an anxiety-generating experience. Retailers are responsible of this feeling and they have opportunities to act in a responsible and ethic manner, to diminish or extinguish, this negative feeling. Welcoming children in the stores, recognizing them as valuable consumers, giving them the opportunity to behave and to interact with the sales assistants are quite simple actions retailers can implement in their stores.

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