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## **Retail strategies in Italian childrenswear stores: an explorative research**

### **Summary**

The purpose of this contribution is to investigate retail strategies in Italian childrenswear stores. According to literature, the strategic orientation of retailers towards children depends upon the recipients of their in-store marketing and communication activities. The store environment, the visual merchandising tactics, the assortment mix, the sales personnel and the in-store communication tools such as catalogues, posters and other point-of-purchase promotional materials may actually be addressed to children, parents or both. Therefore, it is possible to identify three different strategic orientations, that we labelled *focus on parents*, *focus on children* and *focus on co-shopping*. In order to empirically explore each orientation, we carried out a qualitative research on a purposive sample of ten childrenswear stores in Milan. Starting from the literature on children and retail, we identified a list of indicators for assessing the degree of orientation towards children and adults in regard to the assortment choices, the visual merchandising and the in-store communication activities. Such indicators were included in a grid used to collect data in the stores. Furthermore, we conducted informal interviews with the store managers and the sales personnel. The findings of the study emphasized a prevalence of the focus on co-shopping, upholding the importance to simultaneously communicate with both children and parents.

### **Keywords**

Children; apparel stores; assortment; visual merchandising; in-store communication.

### **1. Theoretical framework**

#### *Children, fashion and consumption*

The relationship between children, fashion and consumption represents a relatively recent area of investigation in Italy. The Italian academic world has actually been concerned with children and advertising (see Lombardi, Chiesa, Biagini 2000; Metastasio 2007; Puggelli 2002; Sica 1980; Statera, Bentivegna, Morcellini 1990) and more generally with children and mass media (see D'Amato 1997; Metastasio 2002; Morcellini 1997, 1999; Oliverio Ferraris 1995, 2002, 2008) for long. Dealing with the role of mass media in the construction of the cultural imaginary, these works have investigated the role of advertising in the transmission of values, models and lifestyles to children. In this framework, a particular attention was given to the relationship between advertising and the development of materialistic values in children.

The contributions on children, fashion and consumption, instead, have always represented a minority. Among these works, however, it is possible to distinguish several areas of investigation: the role of consumer objects in the transmission of gender stereotypes to children (Gianini Belotti 1973, Lipperini 2007); children and money (Berti e Bombi 1980, 1988; Bustreo, Castelli, Missaglia, Olivero 2006); the evolution of childrenswear in history (Butazzi 1995; Davanzo Poli 1994; 1999; Levi Pisetsky 2005); the meanings of clothing in childhood and adolescence (Bonino 1995; Fadda 1997; Mangiarotti Frugiuele 1997; Paris 1995); childrenswear buying behaviour (Ironico 2010b; Zinola 1997); the influence of children on the purchases of the family (Axia 1996; Mauri 1996; Metastasio 2002); marketing, communication and retail strategies aimed at children (Ironico 2008, 2010a, 2010b); the development of children into consumers (Ironico 2009, 2010a). Conversely to international literature, Italian researchers have given little attention to the point of purchase. As it will be discussed in the following paragraph, retail settings actually represent one of the most important tools for communicating with children, especially in the apparel sector.

#### *The role of retail settings in childrenswear*

The point of purchase represent one of the most powerful tools to communicate fashion to children. Fashion actually characterizes for distinguishing communication strategies: except for sportswear, jeanswear and accessories – which are comparable to other mass market sectors – television advertising plays an ancillary role. Accordingly, print advertising, fashion parades and points of purchase are typically favoured (Segre Reinach 2005).

Compared to retailing strategies, print advertising is less effective in communicating fashion to children. Considering that pre-school children are unable to read, high visual impact communication tools such as trans-toying, advergames, licensing characters and fantasy testimonials are largely favoured (Ironico 2008). Furthermore, childrenswear magazines such as Vogue Bambini or Mood Bambino are typically addressed to professionals as buyers. As consequence, occasions in which children may be exposed to print advertising are quite limited.

The visit to retail settings, conversely, represents for children an occasion to be exposed not only to products and brands, but also to corporate logos and other visual identity components (chromatic codes, letterings and other symbols), catalogues, fantasy testimonials depictions and, sometimes, advertisements put up on the walls or other in-store promotional materials. Moreover, the store communicate with the so-called *silent selling*, i.e. the store atmosphere and visual merchandising techniques.

The purpose of this contribution is to investigate retail strategies in Italian childrenswear stores. Through a review of the international literature on children and retail, we will propose a taxonomy of assortment, visual merchandising and entertainment stimuli directed at children and parents.

Finally, we will propose a qualitative map aimed at positioning retailers according to their strategic orientations towards children. Such a map will be empirically investigated through the findings of an explorative study carried out in ten childrenswear stores in Milan.

## 2. Childrenswear stores strategic orientations

According to literature (see Cook 2004; Desjardins 2005; Janoff 1999; Rust 1993; Walters 1998; Warren 2001; Williams, Burns 2001), the strategic orientation of retailers towards children depends upon the recipients of their in-store marketing and communication activities. The store environment, the visual merchandising tactics, the assortment mix, the sales personnel and the in-store communication tools such as catalogues, posters and other point-of-purchase promotional materials may actually be addressed to children, parents or both. Therefore, literature enables to identify three different strategic orientations, that we labelled *focus on parents*, *focus on children* and *focus on co-shopping* (figure 1).

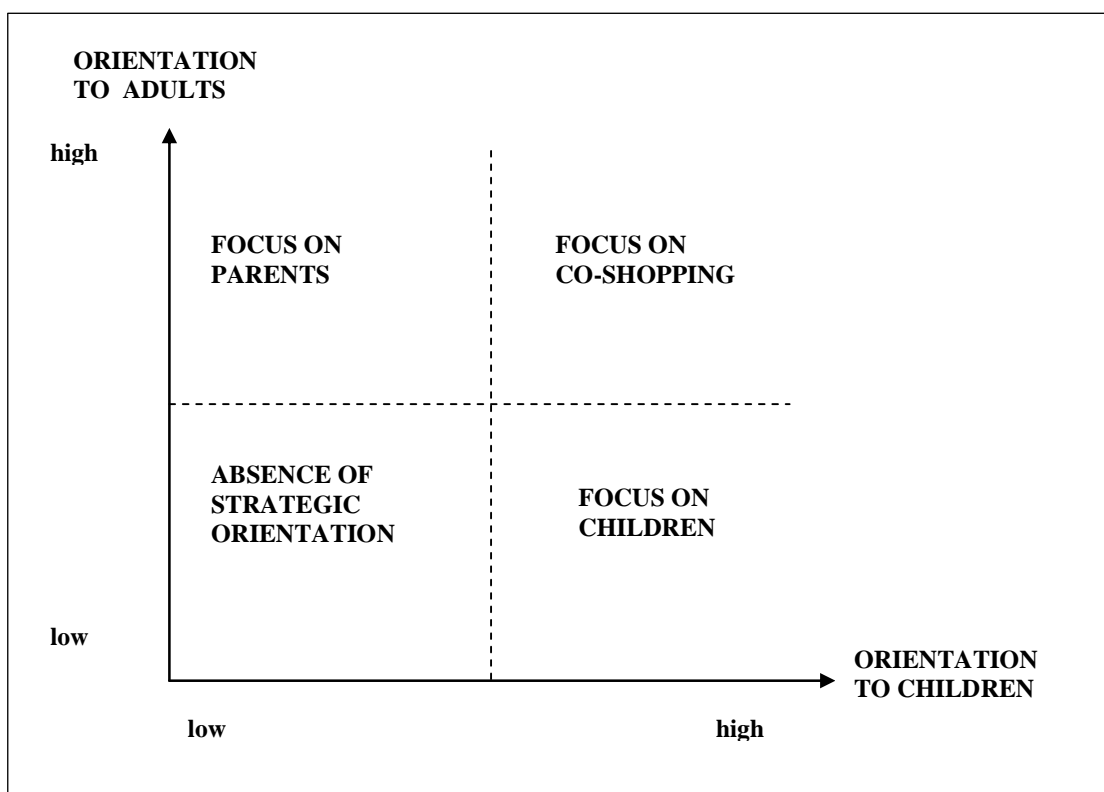


Figure 1: Retailers strategic orientation towards children.

### *Focusing on parents*

When retailers are strategically oriented towards parents, children are considered as a secondary market (McNeal 1992; Ironico 2010a), i.e. a market where the users of the products are children,

but buyers are adults. Accordingly, the aim of retailers is to sell their products through parents, i.e. mothers. Therefore, the store environment, the visual merchandising tactics, the assortment mix, the sales personnel and the in-store communication tools such as catalogues, posters and other point-of-purchase promotional materials are addressed to this target.

In this dialog with parents, children's interaction with products and spaces is typically discouraged, as children are considered as disturbing agents. Children's need to be watched over actually diverts adults from shopping, making their shopping experience problematic, stressful, little absorbing and consequently shorter (Ironico 2010a). Hence, retailers often invest into spaces or activities that entertain children while parents can easily undisturbed conclude their purchases (Coleman 1998; Cook 2004; McKendrick, Bradford, Fielder 2000; Walters 1998; Warren,2001; Williams, Burns 2001; Rust 1993). Examples of such investments are play areas, video theatres, videogame stations or interactive displays. Another simpler initiative is to distribute gadgets or other promotional materials at the entrance of retail settings in order to keep children busy during the shopping of their parents (Rust 1993).

It's important to emphasize that being focalized on parents does not mean ignoring the presence of children in stores, but constitutes a conscious strategic choice that contemplates specific assortment, visual merchandising and entertainment stimuli aimed at *adults as parents*. Such an orientation frequently rises from the awareness that the spaces, products and services children can encounter in retail settings are frequently a source of anxiety and concern for parents. Therefore, retailers choose to concentrate their marketing strategies on three specific areas: safety, health and education (Janoff 1999). Other typical stimuli of this strategic orientation are investments in spaces and services that responds to specific needs of adults as parents, such as nurseries or special parking for expectant mothers (Walters 1998), as well as instructive events for neo-mothers and fathers (Ironico 2010a).

### *Focusing on children*

In this case, retailers invest in specific entertainment, visual merchandising and assortment stimuli in order to gain children's goodwill as a primary, influence or future market (McNeal 1992; Ironico 2010a). Children represent a primary market when they have acquired the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act (how to use money, how to behave in the stores, the role of the sale personnel, product and brand names, and so forth). Consequently, children are a primary market when they are not merely users, but also buyers.

Children represent an influence market when they exert an influence on the purchases of the family by expressing their needs and asserting their preferences. In this case, even if they are unable or unallowed to autonomously conduct a purchase act, they are able to influence its outcome.

The notion of future market, finally, is not related to the different roles children may play in the purchase process (decision-maker, buyer, user, influencer), but to the strategic orientation of companies. Specifically, children represent a future market when companies invest into long-term activities aimed at encouraging the brand loyalty of children as the consumers of tomorrow in a lifetime relationship marketing view.

Typical entertainment stimuli indices of a strategic orientation focused on children are in-store events for children (Desjardins 2005; Lewis 1998); educational activities coupled with the distribution of gadgets such as balloons or posters; games, contests and lotteries; concerts, exhibitions and theatrical performances (Williams, Burns 2001); activities associated to festivities (Walters 1998); assembly lines when children can build their own toys (Desjardins 2005); spaces where children can organize parties (Desjardins 2005; Quart 2003).

Among visual merchandising stimuli, we can include the preference for furniture and display units that facilitate and/or encourage children's interaction with products (Janoff 1999; Warren 2001; Williams Burns 2001), i.e. through low shelves, the addition of steps or stools in proximity to display units; miniaturized equipments, such as child sized toilets (Warren, 2001) or child sized shopping trolleys (Williams, Burns 2001); the use of expressive codes that recall play, liberty and more generally children's culture, such as bright or pastel colours, child writing or drawing, cartoons, comics or illustrations (Andreoli 1996; Cook 2004; Williams, Burns 2001; Ironico 2010a); easily discernable merchandise areas (Warren 2001; Williams Burns 2001) and clear separations between areas designated to different gender or age groups, such as boys and girls worlds (Cook, 2004; Janoff 1999; Williams, Burns 2001).

In relation to assortments, indicators of a strategic orientation focusing on children are the preference for products that can be easily opened and manhandled (Janoff 1999); packagings that stimulate contact, manipulation and physical interaction (Rust, 1993); the use of merchandising and tie-in toys with licensing characters or fantasy testimonials (Coleman 1998; Curan 2000; Day 1999; Ironico 2010a, 2010b; Warren 2001); the preference for products with a high "play value" (Rust 1993), especially trans-toys (Fucini, 1994; Ironico 2010a, 2010b; Schor, 2004). The latter are products that, though answering a specific use function (eating, washing, dressing etc.) are decoded by children as objects they can also play with. Among the assortment stimuli we can also include products that refers to an "age compression" strategy (Schor 2004; Ironico 2010a), i.e. products that satisfy the need of children to feel and appear as grown ups.

Other tools used to directly appeal children is the presence of sales personnel trained to effectively interact with children and not only their mothers (Griffith 2003; Tode 2001); kids' clubs (Walters

1998; Williams Burns 2001) fidelity cards and websites specifically addressed to children (Williams, Burns 2001).

### *Focusing on co-shopping*

According to literature (Carruth, Skinner 2001; Grossbart, Carlson, Walsh 1991), co-shopping refers to the habit of parents of sharing shopping experiences with children. Therefore, being focused of co-shopping means capitalizing the simultaneous presence of parents and children in retail settings. Focusing on co-shopping enables to blend children and parents' consumer culture by responding to the demands of both target groups through the intersecting of different value areas such as play and health, freedom and safety, fun and education (Curan 2000). In this sense, the preference for safe, comfortable and enjoyable materials – such as rubber or bright coloured carpeting – the predilection for extra wide aisles and rounded corners, that allow children to freely experience the selling area avoiding shocks or accidents, represents a way to reconcile safety, freedom and play (Murphy 2005; Warren 2001; Williams, Burns 2001).

In addition to simultaneously employing focus on parent and focus on children stimuli, focus on co-shopping adds other promotional or communicational activities able to involve both target groups. Some examples are coupling products for adults with gadgets for children and vice versa (McNeal, 1992); the use of characters, icons and cult stories belonging to parent's own childhood, creating a and intergenerational bridge (Griffith 2003; Janoff 1999); the preference for packagings, products and communications activities able to stimulate mothers' educative role, i.e. on the learning of colours, shapes, alphabet letters or the names of animals (Rust, 1993). Another example is the sharing of brands and styles, through the so-called "mini-me" strategy (Ironico 2008).

Finally, focusing co-shopping facilitates rewarding shopping experiences for both target groups, since it enables to combine children's aspirations to grow up and adults' fantasies on going back to childhood.

## **Retail strategies in Italian childrenswear stores: an explorative study**

### *Research design*

In order to empirically explore the strategic orientation discussed above, we carried out a qualitative research on a purposive sample of ten childrenswear stores in Milan. Starting from the literature on children and retail, we identified a list of indicators for assessing the degree of orientation towards children and adults in regard to the assortment choices, the visual merchandising and the in-store communication activities. Such indicators were included in a grid used to collect data in the stores (see table 1).

| <b>General information about the store and the store atmosphere</b> |   |
|---|---|
| Name of the store   |   |
| Retail format   | Monobrand boutique<br>Flagship store<br>Chain<br>Department store                                 |
| Targets   | Boys<br>Girls<br>Expectant mothers<br>Women<br>Men  |
| Age groups  | Newborn (0-1 year olds)<br>Baby (1-2 year olds)<br>Kid (3-7 year olds)<br>Junior (8-14 year olds) |
| Price positioning   | Prêt à porter<br>Diffusion<br>Bridge<br>Mass  |
| Prevailing colours  | Pastel<br>Primary<br>Black<br>White<br>Grey<br>Tan<br>Brown                                       |
| Prevailing shapes   | Straight lines (cubes, parallelepipeds, etc.)<br>Round lines (arches, ellipses etc.)<br>Mixed     |
| Prevailing materials  | Wood<br>Glass<br>Metals<br>Rubber<br>Marble<br>Moquette<br>Other                                  |
| Preferential displays   | If present, specify for which categories of products  |
| Multiple displays   | If present, specify for which categories of products  |



| <b>Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards parents</b>  |   |
|--|---|
| Spaces aimed at entertaining children during the shopping of their parents                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play area</li> <li>Video theatre</li> <li>Video game station</li> <li>Other interactive displays</li> <li>Other spaces</li> </ul>  |
| Activities aimed at entertaining children during the shopping of their parents                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gadget distribution</li> <li>Promotional material distribution</li> <li>Other activities</li> </ul>  |
| Initiatives aimed at reducing parents' anxieties and concerns  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healthy products</li> <li>Educational products</li> <li>Initiatives aimed at increasing children's safety</li> <li>Other services or initiatives referring to education, health or safety</li> </ul>   |
| Spaces responding to specific needs of adults as parents   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nursery</li> <li>Special parking for expectant mothers</li> <li>Other spaces</li> </ul>  |
| Services responding to specific needs of adults as parents   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instructive meetings for neo-parents</li> <li>Other services</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards children</b>                                       |   |
| Entertainment activities   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In-store events</li> <li>Educational meetings</li> <li>Games</li> <li>Contests</li> <li>Lotteries</li> <li>Concerts</li> <li>Exhibitions</li> <li>Theatrical performances</li> <li>Activities associated to festivities</li> <li>Assembly lines when children can build their own toys</li> <li>Spaces where children can organize parties</li> <li>Other activities</li> </ul>  |
| Furniture and display units that facilitate and/or encourage children's interaction with products and spaces | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Miniaturized equipments</li> <li>Low shelves</li> <li>Addition of steps to display units</li> <li>Stools in proximity to display units</li> <li>Easily discernable merchandise areas</li> <li>Clear separations between areas designated to different gender or age groups</li> <li>Products that can be easily opened and manhandled</li> <li>Packagings that stimulate contact, manipulation and physical interaction</li> <li>Other initiatives aimed at facilitating and/or encouraging children's interaction with products and spaces</li> </ul> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Expressive codes familiar to children                                   | Bright or pastel colours<br>Child writing or drawing<br>Cartoons<br>Comics<br>Illustration   |
| Retailing stimuli that recall play, liberty and/or children's culture   | Licensing characters<br>Fantasy testimonials<br>Trans-toys and other initiatives aimed at increasing the play value of products and spaces<br>Age-compression<br>Other retailing stimuli                         |
| Other services specifically addressed to children                       | Sales personnel trained to effectively interact with children<br>Kids' clubs<br>Fidelity cards<br>Websites<br>Other services   |
| <b>Indicators assessing a focus on co-shopping</b>                      |  |
| Initiatives aimed at reconciling children's and parents' needs          | Wide isles<br>Round corners<br>Bright coloured carpeting<br>Bright coloured rubber<br>Other safe, comfortable and enjoyable materials<br>Other initiatives   |
| Promotional activities simultaneously addressed to parents and children | Coupling products for adults with gadget for children and vice versa<br>Presence of packagings, products and communications activities able to stimulate parents' educative role<br>Other promotional activities |
| Other initiatives able to blend children's and parent's culture         | Use of characters, icons and cult stories belonging to parent's own childhood<br>"Mini me" and other initiatives that allows parents and children to share brands and styles<br>Other initiatives                |

Table 1: The grid used to collect data in the stores.

Furthermore, we informally interviewed store managers and the sales personnel, collected promotional materials, took photographs and qualitative notes on the retail setting.

In addition to general information about the stores selected for the study (name of the store, retail format, targets, price positioning), the grid included general items on the store atmosphere and visual merchandising (prevailing colours, shapes and materials; prevailing layouts; presence of preferential or multiple displays). In order to assess the degree of orientation towards parents, the

grid included items on the presence of spaces or activities aimed at entertaining children during the shopping of their parents (play areas, video theatres, interactive displays, gadget distribution and so forth), initiatives aimed at reducing parents' anxieties and concerns (educational products, healthy products, etc.), and spaces and/or services responding to specific needs of adults as parents (nurseries, instructive meetings for neo-parents, etc.).

In order to assess the degree of orientation towards children, the grid included items on entertainment activities (in-store events, educational meetings, games, contests and lotteries, etc.), merchandising stimuli (furniture and display units that encourage children's interaction with products, miniaturized equipments, etc.) and assortment choices (merchandising and tie-in toys with licensing characters or fantasy testimonials, trans-toying, age compression, sales personnel trained to effectively interact with children, etc.).

In order to assess focus on co-shopping, we surveyed the simultaneous presence of retail stimuli addressed to both children and parents, as well as the presence of initiatives able to blend children's and parents' needs (wide aisles, round corners, safe, comfortable and enjoyable materials, etc.) and/or culture (characters, icons and cult stories belonging to parent's own childhood; initiatives that allows parents and children to share brands and styles, etc.).

The store selected for the study were Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, Chicco, Guess Kids, Gusella, H&M, I Pinco Pallino, Miki House, Oviessse, Simonetta, and Zara. The characteristics of the sample are summed up in table 2:

| <i>Store</i>            | <i>Retail format</i> | <i>Targets</i>   | <i>Positioning</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------|
| Agatha Ruiz de la Prada | Flagship store       | Women, men, boys (0-14), girls (0-14)                    | Bridge             |
| Chicco                  | Chain                | Expectant mothers, boys (0-14), girls (0-14)             | Mass               |
| Guess Kids              | Monobrand boutique   | Boys (0-16), girls (0-16)                                | Bridge             |
| Gusella                 | Multibrand boutique  | Expectant mothers, boys (0-14), girls (0-14)             | Diffusion          |
| H&M                     | Chain                | Women, men, boys (0-14), girls (0-14)                    | Mass               |
| I Pinco Pallino         | Monobrand boutique   | Boys (0-14), girls (0-14)                                | Prêt à porter      |
| Miki House              | Monobrand boutique   | Boys (0-14), girls (0-14)                                | Bridge             |
| Oviessse                | Department store     | Women, expectant mothers, men, boys (0-14), girls (0-14) | Mass               |

| <i>Store</i> | <i>Retail format</i> | <i>Targets</i>   | <i>Positioning</i> |
|--------------|----------------------|--|--------------------|
| Simonetta    | Monobrand boutique   | Girls (0-16)   | Diffusion          |
| Zara         | Chain                | Women, men, expectant mothers, boys (0-14), girls (0-14) | Mass               |

Table 2: The stores selected for the study.

## **The findings of the study**

### *Retail strategies aimed at parents*

Among the stores selected for the study, the degree of orientation towards parents mainly emerged in relation to visual merchandising and assortment stimuli. With regard to entertainment, the only exception is represented by Chicco, that periodically organizes educational events for neo-parents.

With regard to the activities aimed at entertaining children during the shopping of their parents, we registered play areas at Oviessè's and Chicco's, a Nintendo DS station at Gusella and video theatres and maxi-screens at Oviessè's, Gusella's and I Pinco Pallino's. Gusella's and I Pinco Pallino's maxi-screens, however, appeared to be mainly directed at promoting collections and brands by broadcasting fashion parades, rather than entertaining children with cartoons and videoclips. Other investments directed at getting better parents' shopping experiences were relax areas furnished with couches and armchairs for children at Gusella's, Guess' and Miki House's.

Among assortment stimuli, Chicco and Gusella proved to value quality and healthy products such as physiological shoes and garments manufactured with natural fibres. Chicco, in particular, proved to respond to the specific needs of parents by also integrating its assortment with puericulture books and other useful publications for neo-parents.

Other services indices of an orientation towards parents were the nurseries at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's and Chicco's; the structures aimed at facilitating the transit with strollers, such as the wide lifts at Chicco's, Gusella's, Oviessè's and Zara's, the ramp at Gusella's, and, more generally, the wide aisles at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada and Gusella's. Another interesting initiative at Gusella's is the availability of an orthopaedist every Saturday afternoon in order to advise customers in their purchases.

### *Retail strategies aimed at children*

Among the stores included in the sample, the degree of orientation towards children mainly emerged in relation to visual merchandising and assortment stimuli. Measures to facilitate

children's access to products by putting them at their hand level were registered in all the ten stores, but with big differences. Sometimes, in fact, children's interaction with products was discouraged by the store's personnel and a formal atmosphere, as in the case of I Pinco Pallino. In other more numerous cases, the presence of low fixtures was contradicted by the presence of sharp edges or the use of improper and dangerous materials for children, especially glass. Measures to make children's store experience safer, as it will be discussed later, were only registered at Chicco's, Guess', Gusella's, and Miki House, with the prevalence of rounded corners and more generally rounded shapes and/or the presence of carpets able to cushion possible children's falls. Fixture miniaturization, finally, was detected only at Miki House's.

The use of expressive codes that recall play, liberty and more generally children's culture proved to be more common. Apart from the use of bright colours for furniture and fixtures, that was particularly evident at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's, Guess Kids' and H&M's, the sharing of children's culture emerged from the employ of symbols such as flowers, hearts, moons, stars and clouds – especially at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's and, to a lesser extent, at Guess' and H&M's – Miki House's fantasy testimonial – a teddy bear that recurs on products, furniture and a one meter totem at the entrance of the store – and child writing. Child writing, in particular, is the main characteristic of I Pinco Pallino's boutique and recurs on the floor, furniture, fixtures and POP materials. Child writing is used by I Pinco Pallino to tell a fairy-tale, in line with the brand's values and positioning, that refers to children's innocence and genuineness.

In many stores selected for the study, play value increases thanks to the application of the trans-toying strategy to fixtures, furniture and display units: Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's visual identity symbols, i.e. hearts, flowers and moons, mould the shapes of carpets, door-handles, tables, chairs and stools; Gusella features little bear-shaped lamps, as well as tree- and heart-shaped display units; H&M features train- and giraffe-shaped display units, in addition to a pastel coloured metre where children can amuse measuring their height; at Miki House's many products are displayed on teddy bears and other toys, and children can sit on miniaturized chairs moulded on the shapes of the brand's fantasy testimonial; Oviessa's play area features a cat-shaped interactive display; crystal hearts and stars tops I Pinco Pallino's clothes hangers; Simonetta features doll-manacles.

Preferential displays, finally, are used by H&M, Chicco and Miki House for creating focal points through products featuring licensing characters, trans-toying and fantasy testimonials. Another interesting focal point was registered at Miki House's, with the exhibition of a big dinosaur able to easily attract children attention.

In regard to the assortments, play value proved to be enhanced through trans-toying accessories, such as eyed and eared caps at Agata Ruiz de la Prada's; shoes that leaves funny footmarks at

Chicco; doll-shaped backpacks at Gusella's; licensing characters's shaped pursues, backpacks and scarves at H&M's; animal or many other toy-shaped shoes and bags Miki House's; zebra-shaped pursues at Simonetta's and animal-shaped nail polish at Zara's.

Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's, Gusella's, H&M's, I Pinco Pallino, Miki House's and Oviessse's play value is also increased through the integration of the assortments with toys, that are used to create focal points. In the specific case of Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, numerous toys proved to be strongly associated to the brand's visual and statistical identity, such as "Agathita" fashion dolls, that recalls brand name and wears items of the collection, or "Juega con mis diseños" fashion designer kit, through which girls can draw their own Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's collections. The brand name and the brand's chromatic codes and symbols also recurs in pre-school children colouring books.

At Miki House's, the most part of toys is related to the fantasy testimonial. Miki teddy bear, that recurs on clothing items too, represents another powerful tool to vehiculate the brand's visual identity and to increase brand awareness through children's repeated exposition to the brand name and chromatic codes.

At H&M's, instead, the most part of toys is related to licensing characters, that strongly recurs on garments and accessory too. Other H&M's interesting toys are magic sticks, princess diadems and sceptres, ballerina tutu and butterfly wings, particularly in line with girls imaginary.

Licensing characters, even to a lesser extent, were recorded at Gusella's, Oviessse's and Zara's too. However, cartoons prints with anthropomorphic animals, princesses, dancers, dinosaurs and dragons proved to be a common trait of t-shirts and sweatshirts, especially at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's, H&M's, Miki House, Oviessse's and Zara's.

Garments and accessories in line with an age compression strategy were recorded in retail settings featuring particularly fashionable collections, i.e. Guess, H&M, Oviessse, Zara and, to a lesser extent, Gusella and Simonetta. At Guess', age compression also emerges from the advertisements on the walls and POP materials, where models often features made-up faces and show off grown up and, now and then, provoking attitudes.

Other services in line with a focus on children, to conclude, were a sales personnel particularly able to directly interact with children at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's and Gusella's, gadget distribution after the purchase at Chicco, Gusella, and, to a lesser extent, Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's. Chicco and Gusella typically distribute balloons featuring logo, with the result of increasing children's brand awareness through the exposition to brand name.

### *Retail strategies aimed at both children and parents*

As for the other strategic orientations, stimuli indices of a focus on co-shopping mainly emerged in relation to visual merchandising and assortment stimuli. Apart from the presence of stimuli simultaneously directed at children and parents, a co-shopping orientation resulted from the intersection of relevant value areas for both targets, specifically *play and safety*, and *play and tranquillity*.

Play and safety proved to harmonically coexist thanks to the presence of the extra-wide aisles, especially at Agatha Ruiz de la Prada's, that let children freely experience the store playing, running, and jumping avoiding to knock against fixtures, furniture and display units. Furthermore, safety measures such as rounded corners, rounded shapes, carpets and soft materials proved to be playfully valued through the use of bright colours and displays enjoyable for children at Chicco's, Guess' and Gusella's. Even if not particularly playfully valued, rounded corners and rounded shapes were also detected at Miki Houses. At Chicco's and Gusella's, carpets able to cushion possible children's falls were registered too. At Oviessa's, instead, calm coexist with play through the presence of the play area, that let parents to peacefully enjoy shopping attracting children with its bright colours and uncommon shapes, such as those of the trans-toy interactive display.

In regard with the assortments, finally, Guess, Gusella, H&M, and Zara let children and parents share the same brands and styles, especially for those products in line with an "age-compression" or a "mini-me" strategy.

### *The strategic orientations of the retailers*

The indicators of the three strategic orientation detected in the stores selected for the study are summed up in table 3. Interpreting such indicators with the advice of the qualitative notes collected during the visit to the stores and the interviews, we identified the strategic orientations of the retailers selected for the study (see figure 2).

The presence of marketing and communication stimuli directed at both parents and children lead us to position Chicco, Gusella, Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, Oviessa and Guess, Zara and H&M on the focus on co-shopping quadrant. Among them, however, only Gusella, Chicco, Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, and, to a lesser extent, Oviessa, proved to be endowed with a strong and clear positioning, able to respond to both children and parent's demands, in line with a *dual messaging* (Schor 2004; Ironico 2010a ; 2010b) or a *Family Marketing* strategy (Boutilier 1994; Lawrence 2000).

| Store                   | Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards parents   | Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards children   | Other indicators assessing a focus on co-shopping   |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| Agatha Ruiz de la Prada | Nursery  | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Use of bright colours for furniture and fixtures<br>Symbols belonging to children's culture<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units or focal points<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Assortment integrations with toys<br>Cartoons prints<br>Sales personnel able to directly interact with children<br>Gadget distribution after the purchase | Extra-wide aisles   |
| Chicco                  | Educational events for neo-parents<br>Play area<br>Quality and healthy products<br>Useful publications for neo-parents<br>Nursery<br>Structures that facilitate the transit with strollers | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Licensing characters<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Gadgets distribution after the purchase   | Playfully valued safety measures<br>Other safety measures                                 |
| Guess Kids              | Relax area   | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Bright colours for furniture and fixtures<br>Symbols belonging to children's culture<br>Age compression   | Playfully valued safety measures<br>Sharing of brands and styles                          |
| Gusella                 | Nintendo DS station<br>Video theatre<br>Maxi-screen<br>Relax area<br>Quality and healthy products<br>Structures that facilitate the transit with strollers<br>Orthopaedist                 | Measures to facilitate children's access to products<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units and/or focal points<br>Trans-toying accessories or products<br>Assortment integrations with toys<br>Licensing characters<br>Age compression<br>Sales personnel able to directly interact with children<br>Gadget distribution after the purchase  | Playfully valued safety measures<br>Other safety measures<br>Sharing of brands and styles |
| H&M                     |  | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Bright colours for furniture and fixtures<br>Symbols belonging to children's culture<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units and/or focal points<br>Licensing characters<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Assortment integrations with toys<br>Cartoons prints<br>Age compression  | Sharing of brands and styles  |



| <b>Store</b>    | <b>Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards parents</b>               | <b>Indicators assessing the degree of orientation towards children</b>  | <b>Other indicators assessing a focus on co-shopping</b> |
|-----------------|---|---|--|
| I Pinco Pallino | Maxi-screen   | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Child writing<br>Trans-toying for fixture<br>Display units or focal points<br>Assortment integrations with toys   |  |
| Miki House      | Relax area  | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Fixture miniaturization<br>Fantasy testimonial<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units and/or focal points<br>Licensing characters<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Assortment integrations with toys<br>Cartoons prints | Safety measures  |
| Oviesse         | Play area<br>Video theatre<br>Structures that facilitate the transit with strollers | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units and/or focal points<br>Assortment integrations with toys<br>Licensing characters<br>Cartoons prints<br>Age compression  |  |
| Simonetta       |   | Measures that facilitate children's access to products<br>Trans-toying for fixture, display units or focal points<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Age compression  |  |
| Zara            | Structures that facilitate the transit with strollers                               | Measures that facilitate children's access to products,<br>Trans-toying accessories and/or products<br>Licensing characters<br>Cartoons prints<br>Age compression   | Sharing of brands and styles                             |

Table 3. The indicators of the three strategic orientation detected in the stores selected for the study.

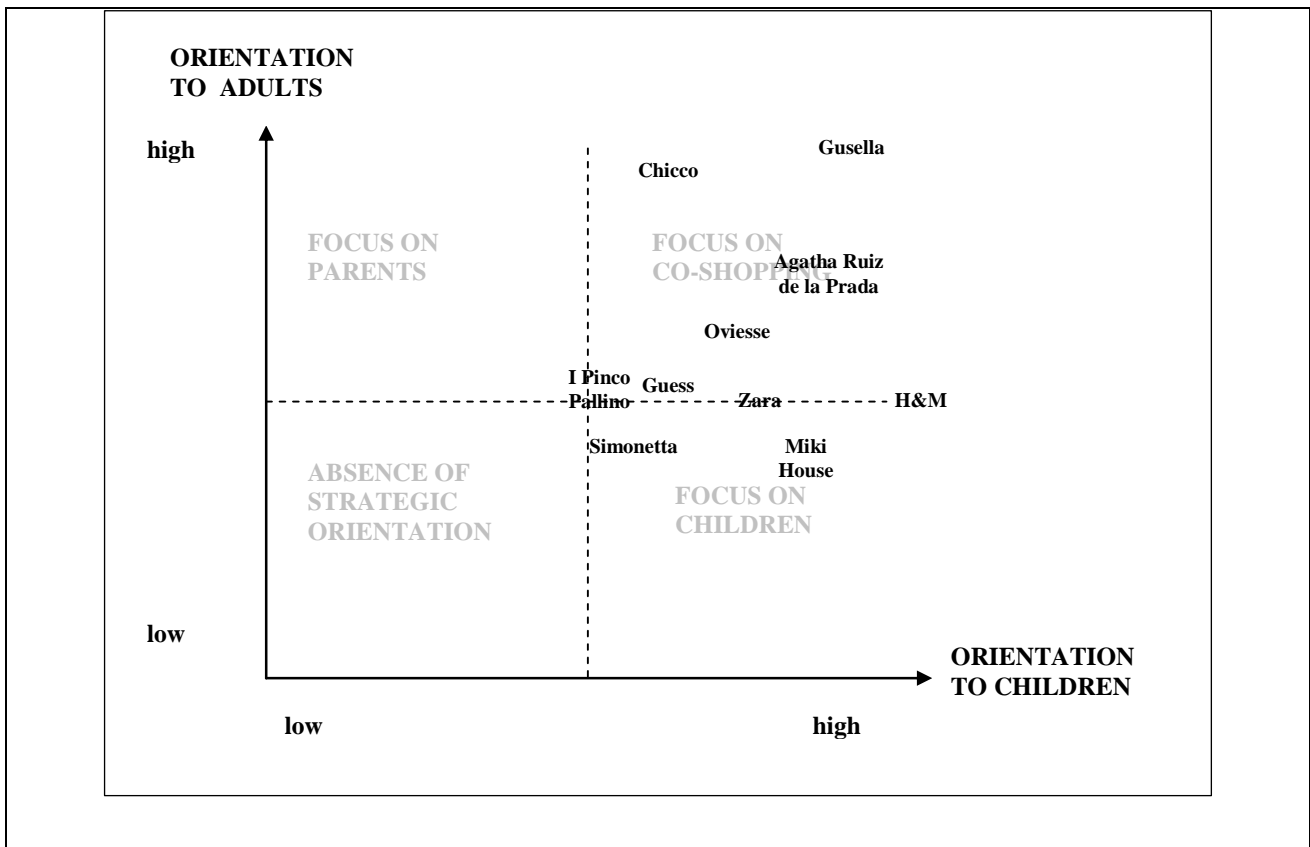


Figure 2: The strategic orientations of the retailers included in the study.

Zara, Guess and H&M, instead, proved to be more in line with a focus on children, despite the sharing of brand and styles among parents and children enabled by the massive presence of age compression garments and accessories. H&M's orientation towards children, specifically, proved to be particularly strong for the substantial use of licensing characters, transtoying and other stimuli in line with children's culture, such as cartoons prints, bright colours or preferential displays with toys. A clear focus on children, on the other hand, emerged for Miki House, thanks to the fantasy testimonial strategy, trans-toy piece of clothing and, more generally, the playful atmosphere that characterizes the store. The interviews with the sales personnel, however, emphasized a strong orientation towards adults and the will to privilege the communication with them, and not with children. Furthermore, the research put in evidence the lack of measures or services specifically oriented to *adults as parents*. The orientation towards parents actually proved to be misunderstood and assimilated to a traditional customer service, unable to respond to the specific needs of parents in terms of safety, health, education or quietness.

The lack of such services is one of the reasons of Simonetta's and I Pinco Pallino's unclear positionings, despite their leadership in childrenswear and, more generally, their premium

collections and an immaculate customer service. I Pinco Pallino's fairy atmosphere actually clashes with the limited sizes of aisles, that inhibit both children's and parent's freedom of movements, especially when they carry baby buggies. Furthermore, trans-toying, pastel colours and child writing, that stimulate children to actively experience the commercial spaces, conflict with the fragility of materials such as crystal and glass and the dangerousness of sharp corners.

Simonetta's weak positioning, to conclude, derives from the lack of spaces and initiatives able to respond to parents needs – especially in terms of safety, since the two floors of the store are connected through dangerous stairs with no handrail – and from the presence of only a few initiatives oriented to children, namely trans-toying for a limited set of accessories, the use of doll-manacles and age-compression for the most trendy lines of the collection.

### **Concluding remarks**

Despite the limited number of retail settings included in the sample, and, more generally, the explorative nature of the study, the findings of the research enables to draw a set of useful managerial implications.

The playful valorisation of consumer goods and spaces through trans-toying; the exploitation of symbols, characters and icons belonging to children's culture through licensing agreements and fantasy testimonials; the use of communication codes familiar to children, such as cartoons or child writing represent powerful tools to directly communicate with children, encouraging an active interaction with products, spaces and communication tools (Ironico 2010b).

Furthermore, such stimuli may also be effective in communicating the visual and stylistic identity of specific brands, as we have seen for Agatha Ruiz de la Prada and Miki House. Fantasy testimonials and assortment integrations with toys that involve real products or brand names may also be effective in increasing children's brand awareness. Toys and games such as "Agathita" fashion dolls, Agatha Ruiz de la Prada fashion designer kit and Miki House little bears actually expose children to corporate logos and other symbols, and involve them in ludic activities where the value of products and brands may be further increased.

The findings of the study also emphasized how some retailers tend to assimilate a common orientation towards adults to a more specific orientation towards parents, lacking in offering services aimed at responding to the specific needs of adults as parents, particularly in relation to safety, health, education and tranquillity.

From this standpoint, a particularly effective positioning emerged for Gusella, Chicco and Agatha Ruiz de la Prada. Such retailers actually proved to responds to both parents and children demands,

combining play and safety (playful valorisation of spaces and products through trans-toying, rounded corners, safe materials, etc.), freedom and health (extra-wide aisles, natural fibres, physiologic shoes). Gusella and Chicco also distinguished for offering specific services oriented to parents' needs, such as educational courses for neo-mothers and fathers, or a paediatric available in the store to advise customers.

Retailers positioned on co-shopping, more in general, emphasize the need to adopt a *Family Marketing* perspective, able to take account of all the agents involved in children's consumption and purchase processes.

A comment on age compression is required too. Despite its tunefulness with a focus on co-shopping, since it allows a sharing of brands and styles among parents and children, such a strategy may often reveal as controversial for its ethic implications. In fact, garments and accessories in line with an age compression strategy are often extremely glamorous, provoking, and more generally inappropriate for children. As a result, they are frequently condemned by parents and opinion leaders, as they support a precocious sexualization of children (Oliverio Ferraris 2008).

To conclude, it is important to briefly discuss the limitations of the current investigation and to suggest lines for future research. The qualitative approach chosen for the study has favoured an in depth exploration of the indicators assessing the orientation towards children and/or adults, preventing a measurement of such dimensions and a quantitative application of the map used for positioning the retailers included in the sample. Accordingly, future research may be addressed at measuring retailers strategic orientation towards children, through a statistical validation of the indicators and the definition of a system of scores able to reckon the right weight of each single indicator. Retailing stimuli such as the use of trans-toying, fantasy testimonials or licensing characters are actually more relevant than other general stimuli such as bright colours, cartoon prints or children's eye-level displays. Similarly, initiatives such as the organization of educational in-store events for neo-parents or the availability of a paediatric are more significant than the availability of relax areas or other spaces aimed at keep children calm during the shopping of their parents. Hence, a quantitative application of the positioning map should not disregard these considerations.

As mentioned before, a further limit of the present study is its external validity. Therefore, future research should be addressed to statistically representative samples of companies, not necessarily belonging to the apparel sector, but also to other categories of products or services as food, furniture, tourism, and so forth. As a result, the investigation may also be extended to other retail formats, such as supermarkets, shopping malls or outlet centers.

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