

HISTORY OF TOY SHOPPING IN AMERICA

I don't remember ever going to a toy store as a child. Although specialty toy stores existed in major cities like New York and Chicago as early as the 1860s, in the towns and suburbs where I lived no store had the primary purpose of selling toys to kids.¹ I remember hobby stores that sold electric train sets and model-building kits, sporting goods stores where you could buy bikes and baseballs, and department stores and dime stores that had toy departments, but these stores sold merchandise primarily to adults, not to children.

Something radical happened in the intervening thirty-plus years in the marketing and selling of toys. Giant toy stores now dot the landscape, offering huge selections and low prices on toys made all over the world. This chapter is devoted to understanding this transformation. Toy retailing has undergone three significant changes in its social organization over the past century. First, the size, economic power, and location of stores have changed. Retail stores have become bigger, more powerful than manufacturers, and more spread out over suburban and quasi-rural areas. Second, the labor force inside retail stores has undergone profound rearrangement. Retail work that was previously

considered appropriate for white family men has become feminized, racially mixed, part time, and temporary. And third, the toys offered for sale inside stores have changed. In contrast to a generation ago, virtually every toy brought to market today has television and movie tie-ins. Exploring the history of toy stores can give clues to where the retail industry is headed and how that future course might be altered.

DEVELOPMENT OF RETAIL GIANTS

Where we shop has changed dramatically over the last century. Prior to the 1950s, the major centers of retail trade were in cities. Those living in suburban or rural settings relied on small local stores, catalog sales, or dime store chains to purchase goods. From the late 1950s through the 1970s, suburban shopping malls were developed on the outskirts of cities on unincorporated land. These original shopping malls were modeled on community-centered downtowns, albeit stripped of their unruly and unsanitary elements. Lizabeth Cohen (1998, 199) writes that the early mall developers took steps to eliminate not only vagrants and prostitutes but also racial minorities and poor people from the shopping landscape. These original shopping malls declined in the 1980s, when they were replaced by big box stores, so called because they are shaped like warehouses, have no windows, and are fronted by large parking lots. Big box stores teamed up in new developments called “power centers” on undeveloped land located near highways on the edges of suburbs (Ortega 1998, 294). Factory outlet malls are another recent trend in retail development: these large groupings of stores, originally located in rural areas, sell discounted factory-direct name-brand merchandise.

This trend may have already peaked. In 1996, there were 329 centers in the United States, but by 2003 their number had dwindled to 230 (Pristin 2004).

The original movement of retail stores, from urban center to suburban shopping mall, was overdetermined by a number of social and political changes after World War II. Stores followed the general out-migration of the middle class from cities, brought about by mortgage lending practices that favored suburban development. Suburbs were based on a gender division of labor in the family in which women were assigned primary domestic responsibilities (including shopping) and men were expected to be the family breadwinners. Although shopping for the family has always been considered “women’s work,” the suburban migration cemented that link by geographically segregating consumerism from the “productive” activity of men: Women now shopped in the suburbs where they lived instead of traveling to cities, where men commuted to work every day. “White flight” was also a factor in this suburbanization of the population, as many whites moved to residentially segregated suburban neighborhoods in response to new civil rights laws that mandated the racial integration of schools. The suburbanization of shopping was also made possible by the ubiquitous spread of private automobiles and government-subsidized highways. In her book *A Consumers’ Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen (2003, 266) emphasizes that the first suburban shopping malls were built with the assumption that customers would be white, middle-class women who had cars.

Another significant cause for the movement of retail out of urban centers was a 1954 change in tax laws. Thomas Hanchett (1996) demonstrates that new “accelerated depreciation” allowances in the 1950s underwrote the original suburban mall de-

velopments. This tax policy permitted developers to write off the costs of new business buildings and claim losses against unrelated income. Although it was originally intended to spur the construction of rental housing, investors instead used this tax law to turn the construction of suburban shopping centers into lucrative tax shelters in the late 1950s and 1960s. Basically, the law allowed developers to deduct the full amount of depreciation on their new construction within the first few years of the project's life instead of gradually deducting the replacement value over the expected thirty- to forty-year life span of the structure. This meant that shopping mall owners could deduct a large percentage of their investments in the first years of business, enabling them to earn quick and hefty profits even if the retail stores in the mall were not making money. Importantly, these financial returns could be made only on new construction; renovation of existing businesses was not favored by accelerated depreciation, so downtown shopping centers were unable to reap any benefit from the tax law. Accelerated depreciation led to a suburban retail building frenzy, so that by 1971, according to Hanchett (1996, 1108), there were close to seven shopping centers for every 100,000 Americans (compared to 0.95 centers for every 100,000 in 1956). Paradoxically, the accelerated depreciation allowances were rarely used to maintain the new structures because owners were not obligated to actually use the money to pay for replacement costs as the buildings became dilapidated. Thus, by 1970, entire shopping centers were in decline while construction of new, larger centers continued nearby (Hanchett 1996, 1103).

Giant retail stores can no longer rely on such lucrative tax shelters to finance new developments. In 1986, Congress revised the depreciation allowance because of worries about severe over-

building. But stores like Wal-Mart no longer need a mortgage to set up a new outlet; they can buy the land and finance the building construction themselves (Ortega 1998, 294). Yet public financing continues to play a role in underwriting new stores. A number of towns and cities now offer tax breaks for new retail developments, hoping that the sales tax revenues generated by new “power malls” and factory outlet malls will shore up declining revenues received from state and federal governments. Municipalities compete with each other to offer shopping center developers ever-larger tax incentives, which ironically have been shown to offset any advantages that come from increased sales tax revenue. In an even more unfortunate irony, cities and towns that have successfully organized to prevent the building of new suburban retail malls (in order to protect their local downtowns) find that the big box stores can easily subvert these goals by locating right across the city line. This means that the neighboring community will reap whatever tax benefit the new store generates and the downtown merchants located in the protesting town will suffer anyway as many of their customers begin to patronize the giant discounters (Nordquist 2003).

How did retailers become so big, rich, and powerful? In the first half of the twentieth century, retail stores were relatively powerless compared to the manufacturers. Manufacturers produced the name-brand items that stores wanted to stock and had the power to set prices for their goods. But in the second half of the twentieth century, the relative power of retailers and manufacturers flipped. Today, the retail giants determine what they will offer for sale in their stores and how much they will charge for the merchandise. Their high-volume buying power can make or break a manufacturer. They can and do demand low pricing, and

if producers are unable to meet those requirements, the retailers move to another supplier or open their own factories overseas (Frank 1999).²

This change in the relationship between retailers and manufacturers was partly a result of the federal government's deregulation of trade. In 1978, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) outlawed the practice of manufacturers' setting the price for their goods. Price fixing was never the law of the land (it was contrary to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act guaranteeing free trade), but from the Great Depression through the 1970s several states authorized the practice as a way to ensure "fair trade." Also known as "retail price maintenance," fair trade laws (as they were known by their advocates) gave manufacturers the right to set prices for their goods as an expression of their patent rights and copyrights. This meant that all stores that carried "brand-name" merchandise had to agree to sell it at the same, agreed-upon price. Small retailers were often seen as the beneficiaries of these laws because, unlike large department stores, they could not offer discounts on popular items and afford to stay in business (Bluestone et al. 1981; Hollander 1986 [1954]).

Large department stores, like Macy's, fought price restrictions, and many stores found ways to subvert the regulations. Macy's department store began in the nineteenth century as a discounter promising the lowest prices on popular goods (Hower 1943). It undercut competitors all the time, which it could do because of its "cash down" policy (that is, no credit was offered). After 1900, Macy's came under increasing attack for its price cutting, seen at the time as an unethical business practice. Between 1900 and 1914, Macy's was involved in a number of lawsuits by manufac-

turers charging that the store violated their patent rights by selling their goods at a lower-than-agreed-upon price. Although Macy's won most of these battles (including one that made it to the Supreme Court in 1913), fair trade legislation passed in subsequent decades restricted its ability to offer discounts on popular brands.³

It is hard to imagine from our vantage point today, but for most of the twentieth century, the very idea of discounting was considered unseemly. An economist writing at midcentury noted that many business professors and textbook writers of the time did not discuss discounting because it was considered in some trade circles to be "unethical" and not quite "respectable" (Hollander 1986 [1954], 14). Newspapers often refused to accept advertisements from discount stores (Brecher 1949a). Even consumers were wary of the practice. A 1949 article in *Consumer Reports* entitled "Buying at a Discount: Is It against the Law?" (Brecher 1949a) summed up the concern. The article emphasized that consumers needn't worry about buying goods at discount. The enforcement of fair trade laws was a private matter between manufacturers and retailers and as such had unpredictable results even for defendants in civil court cases. Consumers could never face criminal charges of discount shopping. Nevertheless, *Consumer Reports* stopped short of fully endorsing discount shopping, sending a very mixed message to consumers. Earlier in the same year, the organization sent undercover shoppers to investigate discount stores in cities around the country. This research found over one hundred "admitted" discount houses in New York City, twelve in Chicago, eight in Los Angeles, five in Seattle, and two in Baltimore. The magazine concluded that "buying at a discount

is a widespread practice” but refused to disclose the names of the discount stores in order to protect them from potential damage suits. To consumers interested in bargain shopping, it offered the following advice on “how to find a discount house”: “If you want to find a discount house in your own city, don’t write to CU [Consumer Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports*]. Instead, ask your friends and acquaintances, the man in your company who does the company’s purchasing, people you know who are in the retail business, or others in a position to know. By all odds the most effective way to find a discount house is to ask other people” (Brecher 1949b, 375). Not surprisingly, the general impression of consumers was that buying goods at discounts was something done under the table; it was certainly not an aspect of shopping to brag about.

That all changed when the FTC ended retail price fixing in 1978, a time when economic liberalization was sweeping through government. Not only retail but also the airline industry was deregulated. (Prior to the 1970s the government had approved airline routes and fares.) The FTC deregulation of retail meant that products could have a “suggested retail price” from the manufacturer but not a mandatory price.

The impact on manufacturer-retail relationships was immediate and profound. Prior to deregulation, most retail stores controlled the merchandising and display of commodities but not their design or manufacture. The two were part of a team, with retailers reliant on trademarked brands advertised by manufacturers to lure customers into their stores and manufacturers reliant on retailers to sell their goods at a minimum price to maintain their profits. But once the FTC undercut the manufacturer’s

retail price, the manufacturer and retailer became competing companies. In his history of the Gap stores, Louis Nevaer (2001) points out that after 1978 the manufacturer and retailer were no longer *allowed* to cooperate with each other on price fixing because that would now be defined as collusion, an illegal business practice.

This story of deregulation is important for understanding the rise of large discount toy chains in the 1970s and 1980s. The demise of manufacturer price fixing inspired increased competition among retailers to offer discounted goods. Stores were forced to cut their profit margins on the sale of name-brand goods and increase their size in the hope that a high volume of trade would keep them afloat. Giant toy stores like the Toy Warehouse where I worked are called “category killers” by marketing experts.⁴ This term is used when the discounter strategy is applied to one category of merchandise, like food, pet care, or toys. The discounter strategy is “developing large sites and maximizing efficiency, building high volume with low prices, and then negotiating appropriate discounts from manufacturers, investing in technology and reducing logistics costs” (Corstjens and Corstjens 1995, 101). The goal of the category killers is to control the entire market for the goods they sell. If successful, they can demand concessions from manufacturers, who must give giant stores incentives to place their products on the shelves.

The “golden age” of the category killer was the 1990s (Corstjens and Corstjens 1995, 103). Since then, the category killers have come under siege by giant discounters like Wal-Mart and Target, which can offer even lower prices because they can sell more merchandise due to their higher volume of trade. The

Toy Warehouse is now struggling to keep up with Wal-Mart, now the largest toy retailer, indeed the largest private employer, in the country (Michman and Mazze 2001).

Under these circumstances of competitive discount pricing, according to Nevaer, the only way for retailers to ensure profitability is to manufacture their own brands. Profits still can be made at the manufacturing stage by sending production overseas to factories employing workers at extremely low wages. The Gap was the first store to pursue this strategy of “vertical integration,” an approach that was quickly replicated by other retailers. When the Gap first opened in 1969, 90 percent of the clothes it sold were manufactured by Levi’s in factories located throughout the United States. At that time, Levi’s controlled the price of its clothing, so the price charged by the Gap was pretty much the same as that of any other place. After deregulation, the percentage of Levi’s sold in Gap stores steadily declined, and Levi’s were replaced by Gap jeans. By 1991, all of the clothes sold in the Gap were manufactured by the Gap in overseas factories.

Giant toy stores are not vertically integrated in this way, since they do not make their own toys, but they do make deals with manufacturers to produce store “exclusives”—that is, toys specially made for sale only in their stores. Thus Mattel makes a special Barbie doll available only at the Toy Warehouse and another available only at Diamond Toys. But stores are not allowed to control the distribution of manufacturers’ products. In 1997, the FTC won its case against the toy store giant Toys “R” Us, which was charged with illegally pressuring toy makers into not selling popular toys to warehouse clubs, a ruling that the store immediately appealed (Miller 1998). Any collusion between stores and

manufacturers is dubious from a legal perspective unless the store owns—or directly subcontracts from—the manufacturer.

Since they do not manufacture their own products, toy stores attempt to develop brand loyalty to the stores themselves. The shopping experience itself is now sold to consumers. Retailers want customers to think of their stores as a destination, not a mere outlet for the distribution of products. Their goal is to move attention away from the products sold, which are available anywhere, even over the Internet, to the place where the products are sold. Thus toy stores today have become brands marketed directly to children (more about that later). “I’m a Toys ‘R’ Us kid,” says one jingle featured on TV advertisements. What the kid is buying is irrelevant; where the kid shops matters more. With this strategy, retailers win and manufacturers lose.

There are stores that opt out of the discounter wars. Diamond Toys is an example, and so are the scattered specialty toy shops often located in neighborhood shopping districts. These stores emphasize status, the reputedly high quality and/or unique merchandise they sell, and excellent service. The goal of Diamond Toys is to attract a wealthy, cosmopolitan clientele seeking unique, high-quality toys sold by solicitous, knowledgeable service workers (although, as I will point out in a later chapter, this describes the store’s image more than its reality). Stores in the Diamond Toys chain are generally located in upscale shopping districts in major cities and are built to resemble amusement parks, making them appeal to tourists as well as to the wealthy. Other specialty retailers (such as Zany Brainy) focus their inventory on educational, nonviolent, and nonsexist toys. These stores hire former educators and learning specialists to assist adults in mak-

ing their toy selections. Altogether, these specialty toy stores command less than 10 percent of the total toy market. The number of these niche stores has dwindled over time as the stores have become increasingly unable to compete with the category killers and giant discounters (Michman and Mazze 2001).

LABOR HISTORY

Not only the stores but also the people who work inside stores have changed over the past hundred years. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a typical retail worker was a native-born Anglo-Saxon man who was educated, knowledgeable about the specific merchandise he sold, married, and earning salary plus commission. A 1925 photograph taken inside the first Sears store in Chicago shows an all-male staff serving an all-female clientele (Worthy 1984). By the middle of the century, the typical employee had changed: the salesclerk was more likely to be a woman of any race, very young or very old, earning low wages on a part-time or temporary basis, with little or no prior experience (Glazer 1993, 68).

According to Nona Glazer, women made their first inroads into retail when stores transitioned from clerk service to self-service, a process that happened gradually between 1910 and 1960. This transition went along with the standardization of measures and the rise of national advertising. The idea behind self-serve was to replace the expertise of the clerk with the expertise of the customer: instead of relying on the worker for information about the products sold, the customer entered the store with knowledge acquired from advertising campaigns. Packaging was part of this transformation: an increasing number of goods

were purchased in factory-sealed containers. This standardization was brought about in part through demands by consumer groups as a hedge against fraud and adulterated contents. Consumers increasingly relied on information printed on the packages to make their selections instead of consulting with salesclerks.

There were exceptions to this general trend. Dime stores relied on an exclusively female sales force from their inception in the 1880s (Raucher 1991). Some department stores were also an early exception to this gendered pattern of retail service work. Women were the preferred clerks at Macy's, where they composed up to 90 percent of the workforce in the 1870s (Hower 1943). According to Susan Porter Benson (1986), managers attempted to "match" the characteristics of department store salesclerks to the characteristics of shoppers, which meant that most saleswomen were native-born whites. Age was important, as clerks increasingly were expected to model the merchandise they sold (small discounts on merchandise sometimes were allowed for this reason). Men weren't suitable as department store salesclerks, it was thought, because they could be flirtatious and not adequately solicitous.⁵

However, virtually all store managers were men. Variety chain stores like Woolworth, JC Penney, and W. T. Grant sought "average country boys" to run their stores, putting a premium on hiring men who matched the racial/ethnic backgrounds of the rural communities where they were first located. These men were expected to be upstanding members of the community, to "wear jackets and not to wear hats or to smoke" (Raucher 1991, 138). According to Raucher, Woolworth sought clean-cut, honest managers in order to "assure mothers that they could entrust their daughters to a company that protected its salesgirls from any

‘insult.’ Company policy required the dismissal of any man, regardless of his record otherwise, caught making sexual advances to female employees or drinking in public” (141).

While dime stores preferred to hire young women, usually teenagers living at home, department stores like Macy’s would have preferred to hire middle-class women to be salesclerks. But because these women had higher-paying alternative careers, department store managers settled for working-class women. They did endeavor to transform these women into “genteel but deferential workers” (Benson 1986, 5). The goal was to produce an upscale domestic servant who was knowledgeable about the tastes and manners of the bourgeoisie but who would not have the temerity to imitate this upper-class behavior, only to cater to it. Thus workers were trained “to adopt the veneer of a higher class without receiving any of its rights or privileges” (5).

African American women and members of new immigrant groups were not hired as department store clerks, although after World War II black women were sometimes hired as elevator operators and backroom workers (Benson 1986, 209). Early department store policies often barred members of these groups as *customers*, let alone as employees. Stores that would allow black customers would often forbid them from trying on clothes (Cohen 2003, 90). In a notorious example of this racial exclusion, many dime stores in the South allowed African Americans to shop in their stores but not to eat at their lunch counters.

Prior to the dismantling of Jim Crow laws, members of the African American community engaged in a great deal of activism to open consumer access. In the 1930s, for example, several leaders of the black community, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, promoted consumer cam-

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paigns to challenge discriminatory hiring practices in stores. They lobbied for public support under the slogan “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” and advocated voluntary shopping segregation to support black-owned businesses (Cohen 2003; Weems 1998). African American women organized themselves into “housewives’ leagues” in many northern cities to encourage blacks to “support black businesses, buy black-produced products, and patronize black professionals” (Weems 1998, 58). Consumer boycotts and sit-ins begun in the late 1950s successfully publicized and challenged the exclusionary rules in many stores. Although these strategies galvanized national support for integration, whites sometimes retaliated by boycotting stores that treated blacks as equals (Weems 1998, 65).

The 1964 passage of the Civil Rights Act brought an end to the legality of racist shopping restrictions. But by then the suburbanization of retail and the decline of urban centers were well underway, spurred along by “white flight” protesting the new integration laws. So while the most egregious symbols of racism were removed from stores after 1964—“whites only” rest rooms and drinking fountains were eliminated—the law did little to enhance African Americans’ job opportunities in the retail industry. Indeed, as Weems (1998) argues, improved access to previously whites-only stores undermined support for many black-owned businesses, which often lacked the capital to compete for consumer dollars. In his view, “white owned businesses, rather than unfettered black consumers, were the primary beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Act of 1964” (69).

White married women were the preferred employees in the first suburban shopping centers that opened in the 1960s. Their jobs were designed as temporary and part time and were adver-

tised as a means to acquire new friendships, not financial independence (Cohen 2003). Cohen argues that this labor strategy was purposely intended to break union control of retail stores, and it worked. Women shopping mall clerks earned minimum wages without benefits.⁶

By then, however, white women had made inroads into retail management. A 1949 survey reported in the *Journal of Retailing* heralded a “feminine invasion of executive positions” in department and specialty stores (Gerstenberg and Ellsworth 1949, 97). A gendered logic justified women’s inroads into these previously all-male careers. The survey found that women were the vast majority of fashion coordinators, a position that purportedly drew on their “instinctive color sense, plus a feeling for fashion and style” (99). Women composed about half of all auditors, buyers, and personnel directors at the time of the survey, but this too had a “logical” (that is, gendered) explanation, according to the authors: “The intuitive ability of women to understand others combined with a natural patience are characteristics that are highly essential to the effective performance of many of the activities associated with these positions” (101). Thus, over the course of the century, many of the jobs that had previously been seen as demanding “competent, trustworthy, and loyal men” (Raucher 1991, 131) were redefined as appropriate for “intuitive” and “patient” women endowed with “instinctive color sense.”

Today retail sales is one of the most diverse sectors of the labor force. But as chapter 3 will discuss, workers are segregated by type of store and stratified hierarchically within stores. In general, the more upscale the store and high paying the position, the more likely the employee will be a white, middle-class woman or man. Discount stores attract a “less refined” sales force, in part because

wages are so low and also because the clerk is less involved in the actual work of selling the merchandise to customers. Expensive stores often tout the expertise of their sales staff in their advertising. Customers are urged to believe that spending more at their store for the same products available at the discounters is worth it because the store offers consultation with a professional and knowledgeable salesclerk. Although, as I will argue, these claims to expertise are highly dubious, by hiring workers with race, class, and gender privilege (if they can afford it) these stores signal their commitment to high-quality customer service. Consequently, for those consumers today who have a choice of where to shop, the decision usually involves picking the race, class, and gender of the person who will be serving them.⁷

THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY AND THE MARKETING OF TOYS

A third major change in the history of toy stores concerns the making and marketing of toys. Toys change radically from one generation, even from one season, to the next. This is a source of dismay to many adults, who tend to see moral decline in the consumer preferences of youth. The toys that delight children today are tacky and incite antisocial urges, in contrast to the wonderful toys of their youth that encouraged imaginative play and meaningful attachments. As Heather Hendershot (1998, 134) observes, “[A]dults of any generation will argue that the products of their own youth were good, whereas today’s stuff is bad.”

Although the tendency of adults to condemn children’s preferences is not new, changes in the advertising and marketing of toys to children have played an important role in shaping the toy preferences of children today. In his history of the toy industry,

Stephen Kline (1993) analyzes the changes in the characteristics of toys that were brought about by the deregulation of TV advertising in the 1980s. Prior to that time, limitations were placed on advertisers who marketed to children. Special care had to be taken when describing the advertised products so as not to confuse fact and fantasy in the minds of kids. Also, the number of minutes of ads shown during children's viewing hours had to be limited. In the 1980s the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) deregulated advertising and did away with most restrictions on TV advertising to kids. The immediate impact, according to Kline, was to open the door to "character marketing"—the use of fictional (animated) cartoon characters to promote products, including toys made in their image. As a direct consequence of this deregulation, most toys sold in America today are character toys. (This is not true in nations with regulated TV marketing, like Sweden, Norway, and England. However, syndication and the availability of cable TV are encroaching on these countries' abilities to regulate children's commercial culture.)

For example, prior to deregulation in the United States, Mattel was prevented from launching a kids' show that featured its popular Hot Wheels toy cars. The very first toy/television program character to benefit from deregulation was "Strawberry Shortcake," which was introduced in the 1980s. By the 1990s, no kids' show was brought to TV without at least one product license associated with it. The economic payoff for toy manufacturers was enormous: the U.S. toy market went from a \$2 billion industry in the mid-1970s to over \$12 billion in 1986 (Kline 1993, 140). Marketing to children became increasingly sophisticated as toy companies used cutting-edge social science research methods to study children's toy preferences. Research confirmed the

power of ads in shaping those preferences and also in enhancing children's negotiating power with their parents. As Kline (1993) observes, advertisers saw themselves as "empowering" children vis-à-vis their parents, but of course they were empowering them only as consumers, not in other ways.

One of the reasons given for the FCC deregulation was the failure of media research to document "harm" to children from viewing and consuming certain media products. Kline (1993) notes that researchers and children's advocates were unable to demonstrate scientific "effects" of the kind now required for regulation. There was growing recognition among media researchers that TV culture isn't like a hypodermic needle that doses viewers with specific desires and needs, duping them into buying the advertisers' products. Instead, the effects of TV watching were recognized as dependent on social, cultural, and psychological context. This more sophisticated understanding of media consumption (often the perspective advocated by post-modernist theorists) ironically resulted in freer rein for marketers to do whatever they wanted to sell products to children (Cook 2000).

Kline (1993) argues that this deregulation fundamentally altered the relationship between children and their toys. He maintains that commercial TV is now the most powerful influence shaping children's choice of toys. This is perhaps not surprising given that children now spend one-third of their waking hours in front of the television. The vast majority of teens have TVs in their bedrooms, as do 26 percent of children under age two (Linn 2004, 5). The power and influence of the commercial media on children are unprecedented (Schor 2004).

The importance of advertising in shaping children's culture is

evident on the shelves of toy stores. Kline (1993) points out that there is intense competition for shelf space in toy stores and that retailers today have to be convinced of the prospect of high sales before they commit to a display. This is achieved only through multimedia tie-ins, so the result is a flood of character toys. Thus most children's products now have "personalities" associated with them. If you don't watch children's television or movies, you would be lost in the contemporary toy store. Stores are organized by product lines: Sesame Street, Madeline, Tommy the Train, Spongebob Squarepants, Shrek, and Harry Potter are just a few examples. When I was working in the toy stores, each of these characters had its own display area offering a wide variety of products, including stuffed dolls, talking figurines, backpacks, books, videos, train sets, candies, and board games. The possibilities are endless. I had to start watching Saturday morning cartoons to make sense of it all. Diamond Toys made the practice mandatory: the television in the break room was always supposed to be tuned to Nickelodeon, the cable cartoon network, so that employees could be up to speed on the "hot" character lines in children's merchandise. Because the shelf life of characters is limited—no more than three to six months (Seiter 1993, 199)—constant exposure to television is necessary to stay abreast of the trends.

Kline (1993) maintains that these character toys encourage passivity in children. Toys sold to children today come with "prepackaged" scripts; children's fantasies are governed by the programmed logic of the television shows they consume. This is especially the case with girls' toys, as evidenced by their advertisements: they sparkle and move, and the girl stands back and admires them. Ads for boys' toys, in contrast, often represent the

child as part of the action. Thus the boy becomes the Power Ranger while the girl admires Barbie.

Unfortunately, relatively little research documents children's actual use of toys. While it does appear that Kline (1993) is correct in his observations of how toys are advertised and marketed, it is less clear that children use the toys in the ways these images suggest. As Hendershot (1998, 124) argues, "[T]here is no 1-to-1 correspondence between consumption and use of a specific object and its meaning and significance for the child."

However, concerns about the power of advertisers in shaping children's preferences have inspired a number of parent-led campaigns to censor children's television. The history of these efforts is documented by Hendershot (1998) in her book about television regulation before the V-chip. Hendershot, who is mostly critical of these efforts, argues that children's voices are typically missing from adult discussion of what is good or bad for children. The debate plays out between the adults who design and produce movies and television shows for children on one side and parents on the other side. These two groups have different criteria for judging the value of children's programming. Producers decide if a show is successful on the basis of the profitability of the toys and the other products marketed on it. If sex and violence "sell" to children, producers design their programs and products accordingly. Thus they see themselves as catering to already existing demand. In contrast, many parents decide on the value of children's programming on the basis of their beliefs about childhood innocence and vulnerability. According to Hendershot, they seek to protect children from "adult secrets about life, death, sex, and violence" (8). It upsets them when these themes

feature prominently in the media that are directed at children, so many have engaged in collective efforts to censor children's programming.

According to Karen Sternheimer (2003), television and other mass media are unfairly blamed for corrupting children. She argues that parents who embrace the idea of childhood innocence must find something to blame for children's misdeeds and that television is a handy scapegoat because it is so ubiquitous. It is something children like that their parents generally don't like (since it is geared to kid-level sensibilities and often challenges adult authority). Moreover, the programs and products advertised are not especially sensitive to class distinctions. Children of all backgrounds watch TV, which may add to the middle-class parent's perception of children's programs as unrefined and possibly corrupting influences.⁸

Another strand of the critique of children's media emanates from the community of child psychologists, which has been waging a campaign to ban all marketing to children. Psychologist Susan Linn (2004), for example, argues that children lack the cognitive abilities and solidified values to defend themselves against marketing tactics that try to sell them products that are dangerous (alcohol, tobacco), antisocial (violent video games, sexy dolls), or unhealthful (fast food and soda). She writes: "Children's capacities—to reason, to see beyond their own needs, and to manage their emotions—develop over time. Their values and behavior are influenced by their experience. Preschoolers are more susceptible to influence than older children and adults. Teenagers can reason more effectively than eight-year-olds, but in addition to being buffeted by storms of hormonal changes, the frontal cortex, which governs higher cognitive functioning, including judg-

ment, is not fully developed until their late teens or early twenties” (183).

According to Linn, marketers seeking “cradle-to-grave” brand loyalty are exploiting this vulnerability of children. Increasingly they are aided by developmental psychologists, who help companies market to children using cutting-edge research and theory. Outraged by the unethical implications of using their science to promote harm to children, a number of psychologists in 1992 demanded that the American Psychological Association (APA) take a stand on the issue. The APA Code of Ethics clearly stated that psychologists had the responsibility to use their knowledge to “contribute to human welfare”; marketing to children does the opposite, they claimed. In response, according to Linn, the APA *eliminated* this statement from its code of ethics in 2003.

Linn looks overseas for examples of governments that have banned advertising to children. The Scandinavian countries ban marketing to children under twelve; New Zealand bans junk food advertising to kids. Linn’s goal is to ban advertising to everyone under sixteen.

It is not surprising that some adults turn to censorship, thinking that it is in the best interests of children to protect them from the excesses of consumer capitalism. Many parents feel helpless confronted with children who make incessant demands for toys that they see advertised on TV, and they are repelled by the profit-seeking motives of capitalists who manufacture and sell toys to their children. The danger with the censorship strategy, however, is that it establishes a double standard in the consumer cultures of children and adults. Ironically, the values that are embedded and reproduced in marketing tie-ins for children are similar to those of the consumer landscape confronting adults.

Few researchers acknowledge the double standard in the public's assessment of children's and adults' cultures. Hendershot (1998, 101) wryly points out that adults who consume kid culture are "collectors," while children are considered "slavish dupes." Similarly, Ellen Seiter (1993, 38) notes that adults often see kids' consumer desires as greedy and hedonistic, while failing to recognize similar desires in themselves. She writes, "[P]arents are baffled or revolted by their children's taste for mass market goods, while they fail to recognize their own use of consumption for status purposes." Thus, insofar as children's media culture inculcates questionable values and behavior, it can be seen as imitating adult media culture. Children may want Dora the Explorer and Big Bird, but adults want DKNY and Kenneth Cole. The distinction, if there is one, is hardly profound.

Instead of denying children the pleasures of consumerism through censorship, a more promising approach to addressing these problems is to rethink the role of marketing in creating desires in all of us. Perhaps greater attention should be paid to altering marketing practices to promote health and social responsibility instead of hedonism and status attainment. A number of federal health campaigns (such as antismoking and antidrug campaigns) and social movement organizations (ACT UP, Guerrilla Girls, Adbusters) exemplify this approach, using sophisticated design and high production values in their advertisements to promote the social good. Granted, these campaigns mostly endorse *anticonsumerist* agendas, but their examples show that advertisements do not have to be damaging to health and well-being.

These public service ads do recognize that different approaches to marketing to children and adults are warranted. The tactics, images, and story lines that are designed to appeal to

adults will not necessarily appeal to children, and vice versa. But what shouldn't vary are the values underlying advertisements and the programs they support. If the goal is to change marketing practices to reflect positive social values, then that change should be reflected in all forms of mass media, not only in those directed to children.

CONCLUSION

Because marketing practices are an integral part of the retail industry, transforming those practices is key to making shopping more responsive to our collective well-being. As this chapter has shown, retail stores have evolved radically over a relatively brief span of time. The size of stores has increased as many have pursued the category-killer or discounter strategies, an innovation made possible by trade liberalization and suburbanization in the 1970s. The composition of the labor force within stores has changed, becoming more female and racially diverse as the jobs have declined in hours, pay, and benefits. And toys themselves have changed, partly in response to media deregulation and partly in response to the increasing role of advertising in shaping children's desires. Not all of these changes serve the best interests of consumers or workers. The rest of this book is devoted to exploring the current social organization of the retail toy industry. This investigation will reveal other aspects of shopping in need of transformation.