

Increasing Role Of Children In Family Purchase Decisions

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INTRODUCTION

Children constitute an important target market segment and merit attention from a marketing perspective. The role that children play in making decisions concerning the entire family unit has prompted researchers to direct attention to the study of influence of children. The amount of influence exerted by children varies by product category and stage of the decision making process. For some products, they are active initiators, information seekers, and buyers; whereas, for other product categories, they influence purchases made by the parents.

The purchasing act is governed by how they have been socialized to act as consumers. Family, peers, and media are key socializing agents for children wherein family-specific characteristics such as parental style, family's Sex Role Orientation (SRO) and patterns of communication play key roles. More so, changes taking place in the socio-cultural environment in India (such as emergence of dual-career, single parent families) entail that dimensions of children's influence in family purchase decision making be investigated in a specific context. Indian society vastly differs from the West in terms of family composition and structure, values, norms, and behavior, which affect the role that children play in purchase decision making in families. Hence, the aim of this paper is not only to explore the dimensions already investigated by previous researchers in India and Western Countries, but also to identify directions for future research.

ROLE OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY PURCHASE DECISION MAKING

Influence of children varies by product, product sub-decision, stage of the decision making process, nature of socialization of children, families' gender role orientation, demographic features such as age and gender, and also by respondents selected for investigation of relative influence (Belch et al., 1985). The following sections contain a brief review of research carried out in this context.

INFLUENCE OF CHILDREN BY PRODUCT CATEGORY

In Western literature, children have been reported to wield a lot of influence in purchase decisions for children's products such as snacks (Ahuja and Stinson, 1993); toys (Burns and Harrison, 1985; Jensen, 1995; Williams and Veeck, 1998); children's wear (Converse and Crawford, 1949; Foxman and Tansuhaj, 1988; Holdert and Antonides, 1997; Van Syckle, 1951); and cereals (Belch et al., 1985; Berey and Pollay, 1968). Children have been observed to influence decisions for family products also, such as holiday/vacations (Ahuja and Stinson, 1993; Belch et al., 1985; Dunne, 1999; Holdert and Antonides, 1997; Jenkins, 1979); movies (Darley and Lim, 1986); and eating at particular restaurants or even decision making for the family to eat out (Filiatrault and Ritchie, 1980; Williams and Veeck, 1998). Some researchers investigated the role children play in purchase of children and family products together (Foxman and Tansuhaj, 1988; Geuens et al., 2002; Hall et al., 1995; Mangleburg et al., 1999; McNeal and Yeh, 1997). Jensen (1995) studied three categories of products - those that are primarily for children (e.g., toys, candy), products for family consumption (food, shampoo, toothpaste), and parents' products (gasoline, coffee, rice).

Similarly, Johnson (1995) selected products as categorized by Sheth (1974), products for individual use, those for family use, and finally, products for the household.

The influence of children across product categories and parental responses has been studied with respect to various factors and some studies in this context have been reviewed here.

Berey and Pollay (1968) studied mother and child dyads making purchases of ready-to-eat breakfast cereals.

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They noted that most products are not directly available to a child and the parents generally act as intermediary purchasing agents for the child. *In such cases, the extent of influence a child may have on a parent's purchase decision depends on at least two factors: the child's assertiveness and the parent's child-centeredness.* They hypothesized that the more assertive the child, or the more child-centered the mother, the more likely the mother will purchase the child's favorite brands. However, they found that the mother played a “gatekeeper” role and bought cereals that weighed strongly on nutrition. In cases of disagreement with the child over brand decisions, the mother tried to superimpose her preferences over those of the child. They reasoned such outcomes stem from the mother's perception of the quality of information possessed by the child. Yet, they found that assertiveness by a child could increase the likelihood of the child having his/her favorite brands purchased. **Chan and McNeal (2003)**, in a study of Chinese parents, also reported that parents indulged in considerable gate keeping for children's products.

Mehrotra and Torges (1977) and Williams and Veeck (1998) further noted that no particular attitude or set of attitudes uniquely determines for all products - whether a mother would be influenced by her child or not. Child-centered mothers were more likely to be influenced by their children and family-oriented mothers or women with close knit families were more susceptible to children's influence. Mothers co-viewing TV programs along with their children were more likely to yield to children's influencing attempts for products advertised on those shows.

CHILDRENS' INFLUENCE ACROSS STAGES OF DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Since family decisions are dynamic and interrelated, **Douglas (1983) and Mangleburg (1990)** suggested that the decision making process should be studied across decisions, rather than in relation to a given decision independently. **Szybillo and Sosanie (1977)**, while examining family decision making processes, observed that all members of the family (husband, wife, and children) were greatly involved in all three decision stages (problem recognition, search for information and final selection), when considering a fast food restaurant and a family trip (that is, for products that affect the entire family). The wife/child dyad was very important in initiating a purchase and providing information. Other researchers have also observed that children exert considerable influence during the problem recognition and search stages and the least influence in the final decision stage (**Belch et al, 1985; Filiatrault and Ritchie, 1980; Hempel, 1974**) for family activities such as choice of vacations and restaurants and consumer durables. However, **Holdert and Antonides (1997)** reported that children's influence was higher in the later stages of the decision making process; that is, at the time of alternative evaluation, choice, and purchase for four purchases (holidays, adult and child clothing, and sandwich filling). Recently, **Belch et al. (2005)** proposed that since teenagers are high users of the Internet, they have greater access to market information which could impact their influence in family decision making. They found that teens who perceive themselves to be '*Internet Mavens*' (individuals who relied more upon more for providing Information from the virtual marketplace), as well as their parents, believed that teens were more influential in all stages- initiation and information search, and alternative evaluation and final decision stages. However, their influence was higher in the initiation and information search stages as compared to alternative evaluation and final decision stages.

Children were not seen to have a large impact on instrumental decisions such as how much to spend (**Belch et al., 1985; Jenkins, 1979; Szybillo and Sosanie, 1977**), but do have on expressive decisions such as color, model, brand, shape and time of purchase (**Belch et al., 1985; Darley and Lim, 1986**). However, **Williams and Veeck (1998)** reported that in China, where most families have a single child, the child exerted considerable influence during all stages while buying products for family use. **Beatty and Talpade (1994)** suggested that teens' knowledge affects their perceived influence in the search for information in the decision making process for some products such as the family stereo. The teens' financial clout seems to allow them a greater say in initiating self-purchases, but not in family purchases. Parents' dual income status allows adolescents greater influence in some family durable purchases, but this does not affect self purchases where their influence is already substantial. These effects are pronounced for products that teens care for (e.g., stereo) and use often (e.g., telephone).

While studying Indian families, **Singh (1992)** noted that families differed with respect to their roles in making purchase sub decisions. The “*when to purchase*” decision was generally syncratic (decided by the husband and wife jointly) and also influenced by children. **Hundal (2001)** noted that brand selection decisions were also made jointly by the couple

but were importantly influenced by children in the family. The store where the durables were purchased as well as the making of the actual purchase decision was also decided jointly or by the husband individually (for three durables, but not for air coolers). However, children also “*went to buy*” that is they accompanied their parents at the time of buying televisions, washing machines, and refrigerators. **Kapoor (2001)** collected information from families in Delhi in regard to their roles across stages of purchase decision-making for six durables - televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, personal computers, audio systems, and cars. She found that individual members were associated with multiple roles. The initiator for purchase in a family was typically a young female member, who was likely to be the wife or one of the children. She illustrated that the need for an audio system, personal computer, and television was likely to be first expressed by the children in the family. As *Influencers*, younger members, especially children, were found to affect purchase of a personal computer, audio system, and television. The final purchases were found to be decided upon after consultation with other family members, mainly the husband. Children have not been observed to have a large impact on instrumental decisions such as how much to spend (**Kaur, 2003; Singh and Kaur, 2004; Verma, 1982**), but rather, play a role while making expressive decisions such as color, model, brand, shape, and time of purchase (**Sen Gupta and Verma, 2000; Singh, 1992; Singh and Kaur, 2003; Synovate, 2004**) as validated in the West as well. **Kaur and Singh (2004)** observed that children are individually active in initiating the idea to purchase a durable. In other stages of the decision making process, they exhibit joint influence along with other members of the family. This implies that they provide support to the member exerting influence to increase pressure, but do not wield much influence individually. **Chadha (1995)** concluded that in the older age group, the household's sons and daughters emerge as key persons to introduce new products in the house.

IMPLICATIONS

Research in this context actually describes the process of decision making undergone by the families at the time of making purchases. In India as well as in the West, there is consensus among researchers that besides the nature of the product, the influence of children varies by the stage of decision making process. While Western researchers have taken into account the effect of family type and composition, sex role orientation, parental style, pattern of communication, etc., to bring out a complete picture regarding the role of children; the Indian literature is more limited in this regard. Indian authors have gauged the influence of children only partially and have generally focused on spouses or all family members. Research centering on children is especially needed.

MEDIA EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

There is great concern about children as viewers of advertisements, primarily because young children are exposed to thousands of commercials each year in India (**George, 2003**) as well as in the West (**Kunkel et al., 2004**). Marketers use television as a medium of communication since it affords access to children at much earlier ages than print media can accomplish, largely because textual literacy does not develop until many years after children have become regular television viewers. Approximately, 80% of all advertising targeted to children falls within four product categories: toys, cereals, candies, and fast-food restaurants (**Kunkel and Gantz, 1992**). Young children are able to differentiate between a TV program and a commercial, but are unable to understand the intent of an advertisement until they are 8-10 years of age (**Goldberg et al, 1978**).

Knowledge of advertising tactics and appeals emerges only in early adolescence and develops thereafter (**Boush, Friestad and Rose, 1994**). **John (1999)** notes that “*The ability to recognize bias and deception in ads, coupled with an understanding of advertising's persuasive intent, results in less trust and less liking of commercials*” (p. 190). With increasing age, children's attitude towards ads changes from being positive to negative and further as children step into adolescence, they become skeptical of advertising. **Boush et al. (1994)** concluded that children in young adolescence even exhibited mistrustful predispositions towards advertising. In adolescents, knowledge about advertiser tactics increased with age.

Since ads are particularly effective in persuading children to like and request the product (**Goldberg, Gorn, and Gibson, 1978**), rejection of requests further enhances chances for arousal of conflicts between parents and children (**Atkin, 1978; Kunkel et al., 2004**). The concern here, of course, is due to commercials for candies, snacks, and sugared

cereals far outnumbering commercials for more healthy or nutritious food (**Kunkel and Gantz, 1992**).

A vast number of children have been found to watch television in India and prefer it to reading (**George, 2003**). **Singh (1998)** in India, like **Jensen (1995)** in the U.S., also found that purchase requests by children are strongly stimulated by commercials or by a friend who has recently purchased a product. Retention of advertisements was high among children (for age group 5-15 years), but the percentage of final purchases prompted by exposure to advertisements was low at 30 percent. This was because the most reliable source for discussion, before buying products, was the family and the child also used his own intelligence and experience to solve the purchase problem. **Kapoor and Verma (2005)** investigated children's understanding of TV advertising in a comprehensive study in Delhi. Their findings revealed that children as young as six years could understand the purpose of TV ads and distinguish between a commercial and a TV program. With an increase in the age of the child, cognitive understanding of the ad increased and children above the age of eight years were able to respond to TV ads in a mature and informed manner. Heavy viewing was positively associated with favorable attitudes towards TV ads and, conversely, interest in ads declined with age. Children's exposure to TV ads was determined to a large extent by parents' control of their viewing. Parent-child interaction played an important role in the children's learning of positive consumer values and their parents perceiving the influence as positive on their children's buying response. Both parents and children noted the impact of TV ads on children's purchase requests.

IMPLICATIONS

The impact of media has been widely researched in the West. The attitude of children towards commercials for adult products has been dealt with, with the conjecture that children's involvement in commercials leads to (affects) their purchase behavior as adults. This interest in adult products could also be aroused since one or more members in the family may be buying and using the product/brand and the child is/are also involved in its purchase, either directly or subtly. Therefore, the cause for the attention and interest in commercials, such as humor or the use of a celebrity, should be investigated. The importance of media as a source of information and influence over children should be compared with other elements of the social group such as peers to know the type of information preferred from each source. Media are seen to serve as sources of socialization for children, but their exact impact needs further investigation to help marketers in framing and directing messages. In contrast to this, very few studies in India have focused on the impact of media as sources of information and as a socialization agent, affecting family purchases. Given the exposure and influence of media (including internet) on children, it is imperative that future research should be planned to determine children's attitude towards advertising, and the impact of creative elements.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Researchers found that children exert more influence in higher income and larger families (**Foxman et al., 1989; Palan, 1998; Szybillo, Sosanie, and Tenenbein, 1977; Ward and Wackman, 1972**). The influence of children increases with age (**Atkin, 1978; Darley and Lim, 1986; Mehrotra and Torges, 1977; Moschis and Mitchell, 1986**) and the ability to comprehend the content of advertising messages also increases with age (**Lacznaik and Palan, 2004**). **Moschis and Moore (1979)** found that a significant positive relationship exists between adolescents' socio-economic background and the extent of brand preferences for various products. Age was related to the number of information sources preferred, and there was also an increase with age in the propensity to prefer friends as a source of information. Similarly, the tendency to rely on parents for information and advice decreased with age. It was also found that as the ages of children increased, they preferred to shop without their parents. **Moschis and Churchill (1979)** found positive relationships between the consumption ability of adolescents and social class and age.

Gender differences were also observed as male adolescents displayed more favorable attitudes towards stores, greater consumer affairs knowledge, more materialistic values, and stronger social motivations for consumption. On the other hand, females showed more favorable attitudes towards advertising and scored significantly higher on information seeking and cognitive differentiation measures. In general, female children have stronger influence in family purchase decisions (**Atkin, 1978; Lee and Collins, 1999; Moschis and Mitchell, 1986**) and use influence strategies such as reasoning, asking, and persuading more frequently than do boys (**Lacznaik and Palan, 2004**). **Mangleburg et al. (1999)** proposed that in some families, children are treated more as equals by parents, whereas, in others, children are viewed

as subordinate to parents' authority. These dimensions of family authority or parent-child authoritarianism are likely to be affected by family type, that is, single-parent, step-parent, or intact families. Parental coalition formation is seen as a means to reinforce the decisions made by one spouse and limit children's influence. Family type is expected to be related to parental coalition formation and parent-child authoritarianism. These two dimensions are expected to affect children's influence in family- and child-related purchase decisions. The study revealed that adolescents in single-parent families had greater influence than their counterparts in step and intact families, probably due to differences in socialization with respect to family authority relations. **Kourilsky and Murray (1981)** examined the effect of economic reasoning on satisfaction within the family and found that single-parent families exhibited a higher level of economic reasoning and satisfaction as compared to two-parent families.

Sundberg et al. (1969) reported that Indian girls perceived their families as significantly more cohesive than Indian boys; however, the absolute difference was not great. Sex differences in decision making were also found to be stronger in India than in America. **Dhobal (1999)** noted that across stages of product adoption - awareness, knowledge, preference, conviction, and adoption - for durables, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs), and services, children were previously inactive in all stages of adoption except for the actual adoption stage. However, today, children are active in all the five stages of adoption of durables as well as FMCGs. He reported that in the new urban Indian family, children were influencers/co-deciders at the time of purchase of personal products, consumables, financial products, vacations, educational products, and family automobiles, while they were buyers of family toiletries and initiators or gatekeepers for purchases of household durables.

Bansal (2004) elaborated on the three stages of middle-class Indian youth - *Early Youth (Ages 13-21)*, *Middle Youth (Ages 22-28)*, and *Late Youth (Ages 29 upwards)*. She pointed out that- early youth are basically dependent on parents for funds; their spending power is between \$20-40 per month. They are generally influenced by parents and their peer group. The middle youth has an average spending power of \$140-800 per month, which is either purely disposable income or spent in shouldering some of the responsibility of the family. The primary influencers for this category of youth are peers and workmates. With Business Process Outsourcing jobs coming in, the number of 'middle youth' has shot up. For the late youth, the key decisions include career advancement and children. Given household expenses, the spending power remains equal to or sometimes less than what it was at the middle youth stage. Also, many would be taking up home and car loans, and paying for children's education. The key influencers for them include peer group, workmates, spouse and kids. The consumption areas contain household, kid products, personal clothing and accessories, food, and entertainment.

IMPLICATIONS

The family life-cycle has been seen to be a summary variable to gauge the effect of demographics. However, it has not been used to study the changes occurring in the pattern of influence exerted by children as the family progresses through the life cycle stages. The pattern of decision making in families also varies with presence/absence of children. An attempt can be made in this direction to strengthen the body of research. Indian families are also witnessing a rise in the number of nuclear families, yet a vast majority of the country's population resides in the hinterland where joint/extended families are the norm. Hence, any investigation of the role of children has to be undertaken keeping this reality under consideration.

By 2030, in the markets studied, there will be 800 million tweens. BRANDchild research shows that six in 10 kids pester an average of nine times even after the parents say 'No' to a particular request.

Kids in the markets surveyed view an average of 20,000 Ads every year, and the heartening aspect of this for advertisers and media planners is that most of these are affluent, there are more of them than in the past and their lifetime spends are going to be huge.

"A good product is not enough," reasons Jamie Lord, "It is tapping the emotional need that provides the bond."

The data for the study, culled over five years after interviewing 100,000 kids every year across 35 markets in the Asia Pacific, including cities like Sydney, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Manila and Mumbai threw up some interesting findings.

- ✿ Recognition of corporate logos happens at the age of six months.
- ✿ Brand name requests begin by the age of three years.
- ✿ Differentiating between brand values happens by the age of 10 years.
- ✿ Brand loyalty begins by the age of 11 years.

THEORY OF PESTER POWER

Today's kids have more autonomy and decision-making power within the family than in previous generations, so it follows that kids are vocal about what they want their parents to buy. "*Pester Power*" refers to children's ability to nag their parents into purchasing items they may not otherwise buy. Marketing to children is all about creating pester power, because advertisers know what a powerful force it can be. According to the book *Kidfluence : Why Kids Today Mean Business* (Anne Sutherland & Beth Thompson), pestering can be divided into two categories: "*Persistence*" and "*Importance*". Persistent nagging is not as effective as the more sophisticated "*Importance Nagging*." This latter method appeals to parents' desire to provide the best for their children, and plays on any guilt they may have about not having enough time for their kids.

Parents find themselves under pressure from "*Pester Power*" as they face growing demands from their children. Harnessing its power has become a holy grail for those who believe it to be the key to parents' purse strings.

CONCLUSION

Children are effectively fitting into the consumer role owing to time pressures and income effects in dual career families. Moreover, exposure to mass media and discussions with parents ensure that children are not only aware of the new brands available, but also know how to evaluate them on various parameters. While younger children clearly affect parental behavior and purchases, adolescents have full cognitive development and an understanding of the economic concepts required for processing information and selection.

An analysis of children as consumers helps in the formulation of marketing strategies by identifying the motivations, interests, and attitudes of children who show the greatest involvement in making purchases in a specific product category. It has been seen that they act as purchasing agents for the family and are delegated the task of purchasing products which they themselves do not consume. Products for which children act as purchasing agents should be identified to help marketers understand the features that are preferred by these purchasers and to help direct appropriate messages towards them.

The complexity of the factors typical to the Indian marketing environment such as the prevalence of a joint/extended family system, gifts of durables as dowry, large rural markets, etc., means that studies need to be designed more systematically to capture the effects of all variables important in the Indian family context. Individuals in rural settings in India subscribe to an extended family system, and enter into- and exit from- an extended households according to their needs and requirements throughout life. Extension in family is generally sought for meeting childcare requirements (**Ram and Wong, 1994**) and exit is sought at the time of seeking a job. In India, wives have been seen to exercise covert influence in domestic decisions on critical matters. With their acceptance of the role of breadwinner for the family, they may express themselves more openly and their husbands may increasingly accept their wife's informal power (**Ramu, 1987**).

Khatri (1972) proposed that shifts in family type occur over the life cycle of an individual both in India as well as in the West. Indians have gone through changes in the type of family they live in various sequences: large joint family, small joint family, nuclear family, and nuclear family with dependents. **Khatri** found a larger number of shifts in joint families as compared to nuclear families in India. In the West, establishment of an independent household follows immediately after marriage in most cases. The family type in this case, when the new couple shifted residence, remained the same - that is from nuclear to nuclear. In India, however, in many cases, a newly married husband brought his wife to the same household and continued to stay with his parental family, thus changing the family type to a joint family. He also put forth that for American children living in intact, small sized, nuclear families, shifts in family type are to be less expected. However, for children living in large families, in families characterized by divorce and remarriage, the number of shifts would be higher. He cautioned that restricting focus to present family types and losing sight of the history of changes that have taken place will introduce an uncontrolled source of variation, which is likely to contaminate results. Hence, these shifts need to be gauged in light of the changes occurring in family types.

Children in India may not have the purchasing power comparable to their Western counterparts, but they are still the center of the universe in the Indian family system, and they can actually pull the parents to visit a place time and again. Children are an enormously powerful medium for relationship building in India. They not only influence markets in terms of the parental decision-making to buy certain kinds of products, they are also future consumers. Hence, more investigation of children's roles in family decision making is imperative.

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