

## **Consumer Socialization Of Children : A Study Of Major Influence Factors**

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### **Abstract**

A number of changes have taken place in the past few decades. With the advent of globalization and modernization Indian consumer profile has also undergone a significant change. Children nowadays have been recognized as a powerful segment influencing the family decision making process and hence have received a lot of attention from the marketers, advertisers, academicians, policy makers and of course the students of socialization and consumer behavior. This paper studies the available literature with respect to influence of children in family purchase decision and studies the key socializing agents that have an impact on children's purchase behavior.

**Keywords:** Behavior, Consumer, Family, Socialization, Segment.

### **Introduction**

There was a time when children were not considered an important segment. They were not spoken of as spenders or customers but as future customers. However the change in the social and economic conditions has also changed the role of children as consumers. With the changing family demographics in the globalised world, children are playing a significant role in decision making these days. Today children are not passive users but are influential buyers and are socialized into this role from a very early age. They are viewed as three markets in one: the current market, the future market, and the market of the influential that cause millions of dollars of purchase among their parents. This segment has become very important from Indian perspective however research on this topic in India is very limited. McKinsey (2007) had forecasted that India will be the 5th largest consumer market by 2025. Spencer Stuart (2008) identified that the kids, youth and the urban Indian women are three emerging segments. As per Chandrashekhar and Ghosh, (2007), with the increase in the number of working females the mothers are spending less time at home and with children that has increased the role of children in decision making. Moreover cultural and technological changes have changed the equation between the parents and children. Children have so much influence over the family that their families have become child led. The influence of children on family purchase decisions is an unexplored topic in Indian context and demands research and attention.

### **Children As Consumers**

Children have been spotted out as a very important and unique consumer segment. They are considered as three markets in one. First is the present market for their current product requirements, the future market for all the goods and influential market which influences the parents to spend on different products. Understanding the consumer socialization of Indian child

is relevant for the marketers who want to reach out to this segment, for the researchers to understand the exclusive features of this segment and for the policy makers to ensure that consumer socialization of children takes place in correct and ethical manner.

### **Consumer Socialization Of Children**

Brim (1966) described Socialization as, “the process by which individuals learn social rules and behaviors needed to participate effectively in society.

The term socialization is considered to be the process through which individuals learn to participate effectively in their social environment. Zigler and Child (1969) defined the term “Socialization is a broad term for the whole process by which an individual develops, through transaction with other people, his specific patterns of socially relevant behaviors and experience.”

Ward and Wackman (1974) have defined consumer socialization as “the process by which young people acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the market place”.

Socialization refers to the process whereby a person learns the value system, norms and required behaviour patterns of a given society in which he belongs (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1986; Assael, 1987; McGregor, 2001). Socialization is guided by relatives, peers, religious institutions, and the mass media (Moore, Wilkie, & Alder, 2001).

Hence, consumer socialization is concerned with how individuals become consumers (Lueg and Ponder, 2006). Studies relating to consumer socialization of children have focused mainly on child's learning about interaction at marketplace, the processes through which learning takes place also the changes in the content as well as learning processes that take place over time. In addition, children get an opportunity to acquire consumer skills by observing the consumption pattern of their parents within the family environment This process provides insights into how young people acquire motivations, attitudes and behaviours about the global marketplace.

Consumer socialization agents have been regarded as influential because of their contact frequency with, importance to, or control over rewards and punishments given to consumers. According to Mowen (1993) consumer socialization is based on three components: background factors (e.g., socioeconomics, gender, age, and religion), socialization agents (parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and celebrities; Bush et al., 2000; Clark, Craig, & Bush, 2001; Mowen, 1993), and learning mechanisms (e.g., operant conditioning and modeling; Moschis & Moore, 1979). According to Lueg and Finny (2007), a major component of consumer socialization is the learning process that occurs between developing consumers (e.g., children and adolescents) and socialization agents (e.g., family members, peers, and mass media). In addition, Lueg et al. (2007) viewed that agent – learner communication patterns tend to affect a variety of consumer behaviors. They observed that “consumer socialization addresses how individuals become consumers” (Lueg et al., 2007, p. 26). Similar to general socialization, this model also applies to children. In this case, parents play an important role, especially in providing information.

### **Major Influence Factors**

#### **Family As A Socialization Agent**

The influence of the family members in consumer socialization of children is very significant.

Family develops the consumer information processing skills of children by having an impact on the development intellectual and emotional abilities, motivating them to apply their cognitive abilities in areas of consumer behavior. Different parameters of the family have been evaluated such as family communication, social status, role of mother, gender of child, etc. to understand the influence on consumer socialization of children.

### **Role Of Family Communication In Consumer Socialization Of Children**

The nature of communication between the parents and children has a very important influence in consumer socialization of children. The parents who are more emotionally involved want to avoid conflict or want to limit their child's autonomy knowingly indulge in their children's wishes. Different family structures lead to different consumer socialization of children. Children develop various norms relating to consumer socialization by observing the behavior of their parents and receiving positive as well as negative reinforcement. This trait has been linked to the age of children where interactions decrease with increase in age. A study on adolescents in Malaysia indicated that the parents influence over apparel brands decreased with increasing age of the child (Ghazali, 2011) Children from Plurastic families were identified as most competent as consumers and children from Laissez faire families showed up as least competent consumers. Research has identified that plurastic families encourage consumer learning without stressing monitoring and control of consumption behavior. In recent research rather than universal parental socialization style and family communication, it has been observed that it is the micro environment within the family that helps the child to acquire consumer skills.

### **Other Factors Influencing Family Role In Consumer Socialization Of Children:**

Influence of family on consumer socialization of children is also affected by the social status of the family ( Shim and Snyder, 1995; Marshall et al, 2007) Children of parents with higher educational level are able to perceive persuasive intent in commercials ( Robertson and Rossiter, 1974) Adolescents from families of higher socio economic status were found to socialize faster and were found to be better in consumption role ( Moschis and Churchill Jr, 1978) Also female adolescents were perceived to communicate overtly with their parents, while male adolescents had more probability of receiving a negative reinforcement ( Moschis et al, 1984)

### **Role Of Mother In Consumer Socialization Of Children:**

Among all the family members mother has been identified as a very significant socialization agent. ( Ozgen, 2003; Carlson et al, 1988; Neeley and Coffey, 2007) Mothers with differential parental style were found to have different communicating style with children regarding consumption, exposure of media, views on advertising (Carlson et al, 1988; Carlson et al, 1992; Neeley and Coffey, 2007) Mothers social status and economic status was also found to have a direct influence on consumer socialization of children. In order to save time and efforts educated single mothers were attributing less influence on children and taking more burden of grocery shopping on themselves ( Roshan et al, 1993) Children of full time employed mothers had more exposure with regard to shopping and were reported to shop for clothing more than children of part time or unemployed mothers ( Haynes et al, 1993)

Mother's materialism and her communication style alone was found to be a reliable predictor of a child's level of materialism ( Flouri, 1999) Though importance of father's role has been emphasized in children's socialization experiences, father's role has been found to be very

limited in consumer socialization of children (Coley, 1998; Bakir et al, 2006; Kim et al, 2009) One exception has been a study conducted on French Canadian adolescents where father's influence on children was more in developing sensitivity to apparel brands (Lachance et al, 2003)

### **Influence Of Peers In Consumer Socialization Of Children**

Studies have confirmed that peers appear to be a very important socialization agent contributing to the learning of expressive consumption elements (Moschis and Churchill, 1978) In a study conducted on children of the age group of 6-14 years it was observed that sensitivity to peer group influence was highest by older age group and peer group influence was directly related to the conspicuousness of the product. (Bachmann and John, 1993; Mandrik et al, 2005) Materialism in adolescents was also observed to be related to peer influence (Flouri, 1999) Among socialization agents, peer influence demands more attention of the researchers but again role of family was emphasized in a study highlighting that while peer influence is quite dominating in the early stages of consumer decisions, the influence is found to decline towards actual purchase suggesting that parents may mediate the effect of peer influence (Moschis and Mitchell, 1986)

### **Influence Of Media On Consumer Socialization Of Children**

Media or more specifically television advertising is another socialization agent which has been the subject of many research in the West. Children learn to use media to become aware of new products as they grow (Ward, 1974). It was identified that children believe in and like commercials less if they attribute persuasive intent to them. On the other hand if children attribute assistance intent to them, they will trust them (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974), It is only at 10-11 years that they develop a critical attitude towards commercials and tend to reject commercials directed at young adults. (Uusitalo and Takala, 1993, Butter et al, 1981) The parents might think that they are sieving the information reaching to their children but a study has proved that not only are the children being exposed to adult related information but also appear adept at processing that information. (Hyatt, 2000) The role of family was found to be significant to the extent of controlling the exposure of children to media.

### **Influence Of Culture On The Consumer Socialization Of Children**

Much of the research on consumer socialization has been done in North America and Europe but it is the universality of research findings that are to be examined (Cram, 1999). With the world becoming a global village the findings of consumer socialization of children have also been tried in other cultures. In a study conducted on relatively urban, industrialized, literate, and wealthy families of America, Britain, and Japan, results showed some significant differences. Japanese children watched lesser television as compared to American and British children. While Japanese families were more circumspect and children were expected to learn through observation, trial and error, on the contrary American families were more open, expressive and children were expected to learn through purposive and expressive parental behavior. (Ward et al, 1977; Rose, 1999). Parents in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden too were found to be strict on their child's consumption (Brusdal, 2007). The Indian culture is very different from the Western culture.

Indian culture is dominated by collectivist attitude rather than the individualistic attitude. The

family bonding in India is still very high. At the same time the younger generation is also influenced a lot by western culture. Unlike other cultures, child is the responsibility of parents for a comparatively larger time period. Decisions are still taken by family as a group rather than as an individual. In such a scenario one needs to explore the relevance of different concepts in Indian scenario.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study portray the importance of family, especially the mother, peer group, media and culture that help to develop the knowledge, skills and attitude required to function in the market place. Throughout their childhood, the children develop the skills and values that help them in making and influencing purchases in the present and in the future. Today's children are not only consumers but also act as influencers in the family purchase decisions. In India the number of children influencing the family decision making process is on the rise. The transformation in Indian culture in the form of nuclear families, dual earning couples, single parenthood, delayed parenthood, increase in the number of children channels etc has resulted in increased influence of the children in family decision making.

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