

Tweenagers Influence On Purchase Decision-Making: A Gender Role Orientation (GRO) Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of children aged 10-12 at different stages of purchase decisions and the effect of gender role orientation on a child's involvement. The research findings are based on 101 GB families and show children to be highly involved in all stages of decision making for casual clothes and school packed lunches for themselves including the final stage. In terms of GRO, children with a more egalitarian preference consider themselves more involved in all three stages of decision making. If egalitarian values are spreading within society this would suggest that children are becoming more involved in purchase decisions. However, parents' perceptions do not always correspond with that of the child. A number of explanations for this are presented.

Key Words: Children, Purchase Decisions, Gender Role Orientation

Introduction

Typically, authors considering the role of children in decision making have done so by identifying the effect of the child during the three stages of decision making (information gathering, negotiation and outcome). Until recently, findings have consistently supported the view that children are influential in the first two stages of decision making and not necessarily as effective in the final stage. However, recent studies conducted in New Zealand indicate that the final outcome stage has been increasingly penetrated by adolescents and that there may be merit in re-considering the role of children in family purchases at all stages of decision making (Lee & Beatty, 2002).

Why the Interest in Children's Influence?

Teenagers are an attractive market not only because they influence their parents' spending (Martin & Bush, 2000) but because they have income from allowances or jobs (Mangleburg, 1995). Of course this is not true of all families. Understanding the household decision-making process needs serious and complicated analysis because decision makers in a family will change according to product type, attitudes to purchase decision-making roles in the family and particularly family composition (e.g. single parent families, small and large families - see for example: Holdert & Antonides, 1997). Undeniably however, children and adolescents are more involved in family decision-making and at a younger age (see Roedder-John, 1999).

As children grow older however, they develop more sophisticated decision making skills and abilities. They have experience in decision-making with regard to simple impulse purchases as well as for more planned, longer-term purchases. The child

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rather than the parent may in many instances be the primary decision maker (Kuhn & Eischen, 1997). This may be a consequence of socio-economic conditions as well as the increasingly intimate connection between self and commodity thought to be symbolic of postmodern society (Featherstone, 1990). Marketing campaigns targeted specifically at children of all ages, and the media portrayal of children as consumers, has undoubtedly enhanced this sense of self for both younger children and adolescents.

What Type of Influence Do They Have?

Caution must be exercised over merely accepting the perception of the child in their decision-making role. Belch et al (1985) reported a lower level of children's influence compared to that of the parents regarding both how much to spend and where to purchase using a quantitative approach. Respondents included both parents and one child (average age of child was 17 years). This seems to raise the possibility that whilst the decision may appear to be that of the child, it may be set within pre-determined boundaries established by the parents (such as the parent deciding on the model of car and the child choosing the colour). Erduran (1999), supports this theory by suggesting that there is a difference between making a decision and deciding on a brand. That is, whilst the child may appear to make the final decision, the actual "choice" has been limited by the decisions already made by the parent(s).

Changes in Family Structure and (Sex) Gender Role Orientation (GRO)

The changing structure of the family unit also may influence the role of children in decision making (Rindfleisch, Burroughs & Denton, 1997). It is widely recognised that the types of families and households in the West are increasingly disparate, reflecting changes in relationship development and closure (for UK see Social Trends, 2003). As such, children are now increasingly raised in not just traditional families but also step-parent and single parent families (Haskey, 1998). In addition, the supposed 'marked demise' of gender differences in family buying decisions (Engel et al, 1990) towards a more egalitarian approach may affect various aspects of consumer behaviour with more modern families expecting more involvement from adolescents and more specifically teenagers (8-12 year olds). That is, in families where the gender role orientation is traditional, decision making is more autocratic (Qualls, 1987) but egalitarian role preferences are known to encourage more equal household decision influences (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997).

It is also worth noting single parent families, despite being a "modern phenomenon", seem to be less inclined to shared decision-making within the family (Lee and Collins 2000; Lee and Beatty 2002). However, this needs further exploration as previous studies have principally focused on the traditional nuclear family and those that have considered single parent families (See for example Ahuja et al, 1998) tend to consider the views of the mother only.

Changes in Decision Making Power

Lee and Beatty (2002) indicate that adolescents play a crucial role in some family purchase decisions suggesting they had as much power as their parents in the final outcome of the decision. Indeed, the role of adolescents should not be underestimated, with calls for more research to look at variety of products for public (family) and private (individual) consumption. Given the recognised limitations of the Lee and

Beatty study centering on (a) an observed task of a family deciding (b) where to go for a family meal, the vast array of other products and services associated with family decision making have still to be explored in relation to the current changing social environment.

This Study

Kids growing older younger (KGOY) has been the driving force of much of the debate surrounding the children's marketplace (Kurnit, 2004) in the last decade. In effect the entire youth market has shifted with the implication that tweenagers are the new teenagers. The target audience of toy brands, for example, is very narrow and becoming narrower (Tutt, 2001) and although Kurnit (2004) very recently questioned the whole concept of KGOY (suggesting children just wanted to be "kids") even he recognised that children are increasingly expressing their opinion about family holidays, cars and technological purchases.

This study reflects the assertion that the children's market has shifted and the research focuses on the "tweenagers"- or more specifically, children aged 10-12 years. Although Lee and Beatty (2002) considered 12-19 year olds, by considering the influence of 10-12 year olds in a variety of purchase situations (products for themselves and the family as a whole) a comparison between types of influence could be made and findings could indicate if the shift in the market place influence was occurring at a younger age. Using this age group would also allow further exploration of not just age but also GRO on family making decision and whether those children with a more modern outlook are more involved and parents with a more modern outlook seem to encourage it.

Research Questions

1. To explore the role "tweenagers" have in the three stages of purchase decision making and if or how this varies by GRO and or product type
2. To consider the implications for theory and policy makers and practitioners

Method

A nationally representative sample of GB mothers with children aged 10-12 was recruited by a major marketing research agency. 350 agreed to participate in a university survey on family purchase decision making which involved the husband/partner, the children and themselves self-completing questionnaires independently (to be returned in separate envelopes to ensure confidentiality within the family). 106 families responded with 101 family units being usable. The reasonably high response rate was achieved by offering a £5 shop voucher and the opportunity to be included in a prize draw). 27% of the sample were single parents – clearly above average probably because of the incentives and that there were only two members of the family to marshal.

In this exploratory study we examine how the GRO of the children (tweenagers) and of the parents within a household affect influence. This is to explore if the much vaunted shift in GRO preference is evident within families and apparent at a younger age. We excluded 8-9 year old children at this stage because, on the basis of consultations with teachers, the proposed method (self-completion questionnaires) would not be appropriate. Tweenagers would be represented by 10-12 year olds. We used a self-completion questionnaire rather than observation (the latter used and favoured by Lee & Beatty 2002) as a questionnaire more easily offers the opportunity

to examine a number of different types of decisions (level of involvement in the category and whether the purchase is for the family or just for a child). The authors developed the questionnaires which were thoroughly screened by marketing research experts, teachers, adults and children.

Findings

1. The role “tweenagers” have in the three stages of purchase decision making

In order to compare and contrast the involvement of children and their mothers and fathers we restricted the analysis to the 62 families with a father/male partner in the household and returning a usable questionnaire. This analysis, albeit on a small sample revealed statistically significant differences in perceptions of the child’s involvement.

Most influence:

In terms of who has “most influence” on the final purchase decision, most children, mothers and fathers claimed the mother had most influence in the two product categories examined (packed lunches and casual clothes for self). However, many children thought they had most influence (42% for packed lunches and 36% for casual clothes). On the other hand many mothers did not recognise this influence particularly when it came to the final decision on packed lunches. Fathers were rarely regarded as having most influence by any of the three family members (children, mothers and fathers themselves). Even when we examine “some influence” fathers were seen to be relatively less influential than the other two players (mothers and children).

There are a number of possible explanations for the apparent discrepancies between the perceptions of mothers and children in terms of each others’ influence:

Table 1: Possible Explanations for Apparent Discrepancies

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SUBTLE PERSUASION PHENOMENON: subtle strategies to influence that are not consciously appreciated by the target • KNOWN QUANTITY EFFECT: knowing the tastes of the child, the mother anticipates and selects the “right” purchase and so regards herself as exerting most influence • OUT OF THE LOOP PHENOMENON: not being aware of some of the interactions between other parties • SDB: social desirability bias & posturing despite the use of self completion questionnaires |
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In terms of the first two stages of the decision (search and negotiation/talking), there were again some noteworthy findings.

Search

In terms of searching and looking around mothers were universally recognized as the most involved and fathers as the least involved member of the family. Interestingly fathers downplay the involvement of the children and seem to over-rate the involvement of mothers. This might be because they simply are not close to the action (“out of the loop”). Whilst for casual clothes mothers’ and childrens’ perceptions of each others involvement seem to correspond, this was not the case for packed lunches. Here some children do not seem to recognise the part played by the mother. Fathers, as before, have an inflated view of their partner’s contribution.

Talking

When it comes to talking about a purchase, mothers were again seen to be most involved, followed by children and then fathers lagging someway behind. Again fathers had an inflated view of the mother’s contribution.

2. GRO and perceived involvement in the three purchase decision stages

Adults and children were scored on their gender role orientation (a summated scale based on 12 questions (developed by the authors) and then each group (children, mothers and their partners) was divided into two groups based on the median. This permits examination of those more modern/egalitarian in outlook and those less so or more traditional.

As it seemed likely that gender role orientation might be correlated with gender, we examined the gender composition of the high and low GRO groups.

- For children whilst the high and low GRO groups exhibited no statistically significant difference and the traditional group were evenly split between boys and girls, for the more modern group the split was closer to 40:60 boys and girls.
- For adults, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups (high and low GRO) in terms of gender composition, nor was there even a suggestion of a difference.

This means we can examine the effect of GRO on involvement in the decision process and, for the most part, assume it simply does not reflect a gender difference. However, because of the relatively small number of men in the sample ($n=62$) and the splitting of these into two GRO groups we confine our initial examination to children and mothers ($n=101$). Because of the low sample sizes we will note anything with an 80% or more level of statistical confidence and regard it as potentially indicative. We will of course also note (relative to the natural sequence of decision making) anything at the more conventional levels of statistical confidence.

Looking around a lot (search)

Whilst the more modern child does see his mother as involved in looking around a lot at purchase options (Packed lunches 46%; Casual Clothes 64%), the more traditional child more often sees his/her mother involved (Packed Lunches 71% and Casual Clothes 77%).

Talking a lot (negotiation)

Compared to more traditional children, more modern children see themselves (Casual Clothes $p=.14$ and Packed Lunches $p<.01$) and their mothers being involved in talking about purchases.

Most say

Compared to traditional children, the more modern children regarded themselves more often as having the most say in the final purchase decision on casual clothes (46% versus 29%; $p=.07$). In line with this, more traditional children more often see their mother as having most say compared to the perception by more modern children. This, interestingly, was not mirrored amongst mothers (supporting Belch et al's observation 1985) and potentially reflects the phenomena already mentioned above. For Packed Lunches, there is no difference between modern and more traditional children. However, in this instance, traditional mothers see themselves as having most/some say more often than do modern mothers (96% versus 78%; $p<.01$).

Conclusions

There is support for the view that many children see themselves as having most influence for products purchased for their own consumption however parents did not always recognise this influence. The discrepancies between the perceptions of mothers, partners and children across the three stages of decision making can be

attributed to a number of phenomena (subtle persuasion, known quantity effect, out of the loop and SDB). In terms of GRO, more modern children did appear to be more involved in all three stages of purchase decision making. Though this was not necessarily reflected in the perception of the parents. This suggests that GRO preference has not necessarily changed markedly nor has actual as opposed to perceived behaviour. The programme of research included other survey questions on “last say” in purchase of other categories (including purchases for the family) and follow-up qualitative research, the findings of which will also be presented with recommendations for researchers and policy-makers.

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