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Children as Secondary Socialisation Agents for their Parents

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge associated with consumer socialisation. We investigate how children function as socialisation agents for their parents in influencing their purchase intentions of computer and high-tech products – essentially the idea of the young educating the old.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of the extant literature relating to consumer socialisation, social power and knowledge about computer related and small high-tech products yielded meaningful hypotheses. A structured survey which was required to be completed by dyads (i.e. children and parents) was mailed to Australian families in the state of Victoria. Data obtained from 180 usable responses from the dyads were analysed to test the hypotheses.

Findings – Children are seen to possess expert power over their parents with regards to computer related and small high-tech products; which make them an important agent of secondary socialisation for their parents. Men are perceived as being more knowledgeable than women, a phenomenon which leads mothers to be more inclined in seeking their children's (son's in particular) advice.

Research limitations/implications – This study implies that when children are seen as experts by their parents, they become important agents of secondary socialisation. However, this only relates to the consumption of the product categories studied here. Future research needs to include other product categories in order to assess the validity of the measures.

Practical implications – Marketers of computer related and small high-tech products can benefit from the findings when promoting these products to children and parents.

Originality/value – This research study is unique in Australia and possibly globally.

Keywords – Children, family, consumer socialisation, high-tech products, computer related products

Paper Type – Research Paper

1. Introduction

Learning and teaching consumer related skills, attitudes and knowledge is a complicated process. It takes many different forms, but we seldom express these differences; it is just called 'consumer socialisation'. One distinct difference in socialisation processes is the difference between primary socialisation (prominent in childhood) and secondary socialisation (prominent in adulthood). While primary socialisation is concerned with the establishment of a framework to function in society, secondary socialisation relates to adjustment to this framework. We argue that with regard to small high-tech and computer related products, parents are likely to be secondarily socialised by their children.

The idea of the young educating the old is not new, but it has seldom been addressed in consumer behaviour studies. In terms of consumer socialisation, it has been said that there is a need for a better understanding of how parents acquire new consumer information from their children and the specific types of attitudes, values, and behaviours acquired from children over their lifecycle (Ekström, 2006, Moschis, 1987).

One of the most rapidly changing contexts for the contemporary consumer is that of information and communication technology (Anderson et al., 2007). Older consumers would need to adjust their behaviour in order to meet current changes because many products commonly used today did not exist 20 years ago. The young might be the most important socialisation agents for adult consumers, because they did not have to adapt to these changes – they were born into a technological society. Learning about these products for adult consumers will therefore have to be done through secondary consumer socialisation –they need to update their framework. The young on the other hand, may have established a different framework because they were primarily socialised with these new product categories. Consequently, the young may have gained expert power over the old.

2. Literature Review

Consumer socialisation

Consumer socialisation has generated a significant amount of research over the years, particularly in relation to marketing to children (Ekström, 2006, John, 1999). The most common definition of consumer socialisation is the seminal definition offered by Ward (1974 p. 2) "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace." The focus on 'young people' has been dominant; consumer socialisation research has been mainly concerned with how children learn to function as consumers in the marketplace (e.g. Lueg and Finney, 2007, Chan, 2006, Taeho, 2005). However, consumer socialisation is considered to be a lifelong process (Brim, 1966, Moschis, 1987, Moschis, 2007, Ekström, 2006). The focus in this research is not on how children learn; it is on how they teach. This includes an agent / learner relationship.

In consumer socialisation processes, socialisation agents are specific sources from which norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours are transmitted to consumers (Chan and McNeal, 2006). Our research focuses on how children function as an agent

(as opposed to being the learner) for their parents. Young people who born after 1990, were born into a world of SMS and mobile phones. Both the way of communication (SMS) and the medium (mobile phone) are new to the parent; hence they have to be socialised to use them as adults and are likely to utilise their children as socialisation agents.

Primary and Secondary Consumer Socialisation

It is understood that learning later in life differs from childhood learning (Sinnott, 2008, Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Early learning – referred to as primary socialisation – deals with initial patterns of behaviour, while later learning – referred to as secondary socialisation – deals with adjustment of the initial patterns of behaviour (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Primary socialisation would be most prominent during childhood while secondary socialisation would be most prominent during adulthood. Secondary consumer socialisation can, for example, be learning transmitted to a parent from a child as the agent of socialisation.

Primary socialisation is usually the most important for an individual; the basic structure of all secondary socialisation has to resemble that of primary socialisation (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), because of the ‘learning to crawl before you can walk’ principle. For example, shame of nudity has to do with primary socialisation, while adopting an appropriate dress code have to do with secondary socialisation.

Children might be (primarily) socialised in ways that their parents never were and the parent may in turn perceive the child’s knowledge to be relevant to their (secondarily) socialisation. For example, Mathur (1999) suggests that assistance from family members may have important impact on the adoption of technological innovations by older consumers. Thus, children’s ability to influence their parents would depend on the nature of their (the children’s) primary socialisation.

The basis for all kinds of socialisation is to live in society; entailing conformity to social requirements or norms. An individual can be said to be socialised when he or she has learnt to think and feel accordingly to society’s expectations (Moschis, 1987). In marketing, to live in society – the base for all socialisation – implies to function in the marketplace (Moschis, 1987, Ward, 1974). Further, to function in the marketplace implies a basic understanding of the consumer role. This basic understanding can be seen as primary socialisation, and secondary socialisation can only take place once the basic understanding is reached. Studies have suggested that children reach this level earlier than before: Mallalieu, Palan and Laczniak (2005) suggested that children born in the 1990’s can understand the content and purpose of television advertising at an earlier age than children born in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Thus, children born in the 1990’s could have a greater ability to influence their parents when it comes to marketing at an earlier age than children born a decade or two earlier had. This also suggests that the primary consumer socialisation happens earlier, and that younger children have an ability to be an agent for their parent’s secondary socialisation.

Children are said to be involved in purchases, or rather persuasion of their parent’s purchases. For example, Beatty and Talpade’s (1994) found that children’s product involvement is said to contribute to children’s level of influence on their parent’s decisions. When involvement is high, the children will be motivated to spend more

efforts in requesting and persuading their parents, thus leading to greater relative influence in purchasing a product. In order to illustrate how children socialise their parents, product categories where children have a relative high interest and knowledge should therefore be considered.

Computer Related and Small High-Tech Products

An area where children are likely to be highly engaged in consumption decisions is that of technological complex products (Watne and Brennan, 2009). In 2003, Lindstrom and Seybold demonstrated that children have a high level of interest and knowledge in technological products such as computers (and the internet) and mobile phones. In the present study, we included the wide variety of products available ranging from mobile phones to notebook computers, broadband internet, a printer, an mP3 player, a digital camera, a GPS device and so on. To generate more responses and since these products are regarded as quite similar, two broad categories were used; small high-tech and computer related products.

It has been suggested that children's influence increases when the product is for family usage rather than for personal use of their parents (Bao, 2001). Further, the influence depends on the relative financial risk involved with the product category. Here, computer related products are more expensive than small high-tech products and the latter category are for personal use of the parent while the former could be for family usage. From their perspective, children might be more interested in small high-tech products than computer related products. The lower price makes small high-tech products more accessible to the children. The personal use of small high-tech products might also lead to a higher interest since the child can interact with the products on their own instead of sharing with the family.

Social Power

Social power is where a person has the ability to persuade based on some attribute such as knowledge, expertise or social standing (Cialdini, 1993). In the case of children influencing their parents, such power comes from expertise and knowledge. As mentioned previously, some parents are unable to engage effectively with technology products and find themselves deferring to their children's expertise. Whether the parent would purchase for example a computer for the family or a mobile phone for themselves would also depend on perceived social power of the child (Cialdini, 1993). In general, it seems likely to assume that the child has some sort of *social expert power* in these categories due to the perceived differences in knowledge. The strength of the expert power varies with the extent of the perception of knowledge which the learner attributes to the expert within a given area (French and Raven, 1959). Learners evaluate the 'expertness' in relation to their own knowledge as well as against an absolute standard. An 'absolute standard' could, in this case, be limited to the parent's friends or spouse that have an equal lack of knowledge with regard to these products. Thus, children might have a high potential to influence their parents simply because they might be seen as experts in these particular areas.

Because of their lifelong engagement with technology (Morton, 2002, Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001), it is likely that children would have a higher level of knowledge in our two categories (Lindstrom, 2004, Ekström, 2007). It is also likely

that they would know more than their parents about these categories. Given the effect of expert power, it also seems likely that they would influence their parents about these categories.

The child's expert power may also be influenced by certain demographic variables. For example, Chavda, Haley and Dunn (2005) found a difference in influence from child to parents based on the gender of the child. Technology purchase decisions are often male dominated. Historically, the marketing industry has targeted technology primarily to men (Kearney, 2010). Thus, consumers may also perceive men (in this case sons) to be more knowledgeable about these products. As a result, when it comes to technology products sons may have more expert power than daughters.

Power (even expert power) must be given, not taken. Thus, parents have to concede that their children have such power before it can be used in persuasion situations. For instance, children of single parents frequently have to take over or help with adult tasks (Hahlo, 1999). In these cases, they gain power over the task delegated to them (if they succeed in the task of course). The sharing of consumption behaviour in single parent families may be a matter of time or convenience – there is only one parent after all. Or it may be that single parent families communicate differently regarding consumption. In 2003, Geuens, De Pelsmacker and Mast found that two parent families communicate less with their children about consumer behaviour than one parent families. Thus, it could be that one parent families allow more expert power to the child than do two parent families.

3. Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses relating to computer related and small high-tech products were generated:

H1_a: Families perceive product category knowledge to be higher for children than their parents, which in turn gives children expert power relative to their parents.

H1_b: Sons are perceived to be more knowledgeable than daughters and fathers more than mothers, meaning that expert power is gender related.

H2_a: A child's expert power (perceived knowledge) is directly related to the family's attitude towards that child being a socialisation agent for his/her parents.

H2_b: The attitude towards children as socialisation agents for their parents is more prominent in single parent families than in dual parent families.

No extant empirical investigation in the literature has focused on children acting as socialisation agents for their parents in a consumer culture associated with buyer behaviour of computer and small high-tech products.

4. Method

Measures

The survey instrument was designed to investigate the level of expert knowledge children have compared to their parents and also the families' attitude towards Children as Socialisation Agents (CSA) for their parents. This instrument covered two product categories, i.e., computer related and small high-tech products. Hence, reference was made to products of differing price ranges, which were used by families and for parents' personal use. For each product category, adolescents and parents were required to rate their level of agreement with various statements relating to their attitude towards CSA for their parents. A seven-point likert-type scale was used, anchored at 1 indicating 'strongly disagree' and 7 indicating 'strongly agree'.

Attitude towards CSA for their parents were measured based on the classical primary components of an attitude, i.e., cognitive, affective-evaluative, and conative factors (e.g. Jacoby, 1971, Quester and Lim, 2003). These three components of attitudes were similar; hence they were combined to develop one scale. Thus, 14 items relating to parents as learners, or children as agents such as "I think I could be of help to my parents if they became confused with computer related products" and "I believe I have learnt from my child about small high-tech products" were developed for this purpose. Reliability was tested in terms of internal consistencies with Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951). The Cronbach's Alpha values for all items ranged between .96 and .97 which is considered as being reliable (Hair et al., 2010, Churchill and Iacobucci, 2005).

Perceived knowledge was measured by combining parents' and children's rating of their own knowledge with their dyad partners (children/parents) rating of their knowledge (the ratings ranged from 1 signifying 'little or no knowledge' to 7 signifying 'a great deal of knowledge'). It is important to stress that this was a measure of the *dyads perceived knowledge* and not an absolute measure of individual knowledge. Internal consistency is not vital for this measure because the interest of this measure here relates to how the dyad perceives each other's knowledge and how that impacts their attitude towards CSA for the parent.

A pilot study as well as feedback from both prospective participants and experts in the field of consumer behaviour was used to test the content and to develop face validity (Rossiter, 2002, Brennan et al., 2007) of the survey instrument.

Sample

For the purpose of this study, children were defined as being aged between 16 and 22 and still living at home with at least one parent. The sampling frame was drawn using a database sourced from Australia Post's Lifestyle survey. A covering letter together with the survey instrument was mailed to 3750 families in the state of Victoria, Australia. This allowed a reasonable representation of different socio-economic groups and cultures, hence obtaining a cross-sectional representation. 180 usable responses were received from family dyads. This can be considered to be a reasonable response rate since the survey was self-selected and two persons from each participating family were needed to qualify as a usable response. Based on an extensive investigation of major journals that publish dyadic data, Kenny et al. (2006)

estimated that the typical sample size for this type of study was approximately 80 dyads. A profile of the final respondents is shown in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1: ABOUT HERE

5. Results

When analysing the data, individuals were used as the unit of analysis for items relating to perception of knowledge, whereas dyads were used as the unit of analysis for items relating to attitude towards children as socialisation agents (CSA). This technique facilitates the assumption of nonindependence within the dyads for their attitude towards CSA (Kenny et al., 2006). Simple aggregate statistics (means) and t-tests were used to determine whether the differences in mean ratings were statistically different. Table 2 depicts the mean ratings and 't' values for the different dyad compositions.

INSERT TABLE 2: ABOUT HERE

It is evident from Table 2 that children in general possess a higher level of knowledge than their parents in both the product categories. Families do perceive children as having expert power in these product categories, which is the foundation for children as socialisation agents where the young educate the old. Hence hypotheses H1_a is accepted.

Additionally it can be determined from Table 2 that sons are clearly perceived as being more knowledgeable than daughters and fathers more knowledgeable than mothers. This partly supports H1_b. However, fathers and daughters are equally knowledgeable about computer related products. Hence it could be inferred that although daughters have an advantage in the context of possessing expert power in computer related products compared to their mothers, this would not be the case with their fathers.

Next Pearson's correlation was used to investigate the relationship between children's knowledge in the product categories and dyads' attitudes towards CSA. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3: ABOUT HERE

Table 3 reveals that there is a strong relationship between children's knowledge in both the product categories and the dyads' attitudes towards CSA. Hence hypothesis H2_a is supported – essentially supporting the belief that a child's expert power (perceived knowledge) is directly related to the family's attitude towards CSA.

Finally, an analysis was undertaken to investigate the influence of family size on attitudes towards CSA. The results are shown in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4: ABOUT HERE

Table 4 reveals that in dyads where the stated knowledge gap is large (i.e., children have a great deal of expert power); families have a more positive attitude towards CSA. Also the numbers in Table 4 support hypothesis H2_b, which implies that single parents are more positive about using their children as agents of socialisation. However, this relationship is statistical significant only for computer related products.

6. Discussion and managerial implications

Our findings reveal that children are an important agent of socialisation for their parents when it comes to technology. Children are perceived by families to be more knowledgeable than their parents in both the product categories. Significant differences were observed between the dyad's perception of parent's knowledge and the dyad's perception of children's knowledge in both product categories, except in the case of computer related products associated with father/daughter dyads. Marketers should be aware that children are likely to be the decision makers for procurement of small high-tech products, even when these products are used mainly by the parents.

Sons are clearly perceived to possess more expert power than daughters and also fathers are seen as more knowledgeable than mothers. This means that secondary socialisation of parents by their children depends on the gender of parent and child. Hence, parents tend to trust their sons more than their daughters in the purchase of these types of products. However, this is only true in terms of large purchases for the family (computer related products). Our findings agree with Chavda et al. (2005) who suggest differences between male and female children in terms of the influence they have on their parents when it comes to 'large purchases'.

There is a strong relationship between the children's knowledge in the product categories and the dyad's attitude towards children as socialisation agents for their parents. This clearly indicates that children educate their parents in product categories where children are perceived to be experts. Such socialisation situations may only exist when the child is seen as an expert in the category. This may seem obvious, but it still represents a change in terms of consumer behaviour.

Single parents are more confident about using their children as agents of socialisation than dual parents. However, this is only true when it comes to computer related products. This is possible as computer related products are for family usage, while small high-tech products are mainly for their personal use. Thus, parents rely more on their children as an agent of socialisation in terms of family purchases when the parent does not have a spouse to share consumer experiences with. This means that the increase in single parent families may further accelerate the importance of children as a main socialisation agent for their parent. The changing social structure is likely to impact future marketing practices.

7. Limitations and future research

As this study was conducted in Australia cultural differences may exist. However, our findings are similar to studies done in the UK and USA (Hahlo, 1999, Chavda et al., 2005, Geuens et al., 2003).

The sampling frame only included families in the state of Victoria, hence the findings cannot be generalised. Additionally, as the sampling frame was drawn from the database of Australia Post's Lifestyle Survey it cannot be deemed to be totally random, as this database only includes self-selective households. However, the Australia Post's Lifestyle Survey involves approximately 6 million households per annum and is a highly regarded source for research of this nature.

The scale developed for this study measuring dyads' attitudes towards children as socialisation agents for their parents is unique. Hence it is recommended in the interests of rigorous validation that this scale be tested using a different sample population and also different product categories. One interesting area frequently mentioned in the literature in which children are likely to possess expert power compared to their parents is that associated with the environment. The scales used in our study could be refined to investigate whether children influence the attitudes of their parents concerning the environment.

Our study suggests that a child's perceived expert power determines how important children are as socialisation agents for their parents. However, future research needs to investigate how children gain this expert power in the first place. This will give greater insight into how secondary consumer socialisation works. However, perception of knowledge is only one aspect of socialisation; future research should consider how secondary consumer socialisation processes affects values and beliefs as well.

In the categories investigated in this study, parents seem diffident of making their own purchase decisions, and in need of their children for assistance. Parents prefer ignorance and may be reluctant to learn skills from their children because they are afraid of change; it is easier to let the child do the job. After all, it has been said that ignorance is the parent of fear (Melville, 1851).

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