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Fathers: A Contemporary Perspective on Their Role in Child-Driven Materialism

This paper explores the contemporary role of fathers in child-driven materialistic consumption, a little explored territory. Commencing with an exploration of the child consumer and their influence in personal and family spending, both of which have grown considerably over that last number of decades, followed by an analysis of changes in families and the role fathers now play in the aforementioned. It is also acknowledged that fathers have previously been ignored to a large extent in the majority of research studies concerning parent-child consumption and purchases. As such, valuable insights emerged through an interpretative framework utilised to explore this area. Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed fathers' 'lived' experiences of the purchase and consumption process to emerge. Findings result in fathers, on the one hand, portraying themselves as the traditional authoritarian figure, claiming their spouses relent to materialistic consumption, while concurrently initiating a portion of materialistic purchases themselves. These emergent findings result in an obvious tension within fathers' awareness of the more traditional models of fathering: the strong, authoritative, sensible and responsible parent, versus their recognition of a contemporary dilution of same: the sensitive, involved, engaged, explanatory father.

Keywords: Fathers, child-consumption, purchases, materialism

Introduction

Children have never been as emancipated, articulate and market savvy as they are presently (Gunther and Furnham, 1998). Research further suggests children may now be more sophisticated as materialistic consumers compared to previous generations (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001) and have a significantly greater ability to influence parental expenditure (Lindstrom, 2004).

Valkenburg and Cantor (2001) report that children, circa age five, increasingly engage in independent purchases. The first independent purchase normally occurs in a supermarket together with a parent (McNeal, 1992). Furthermore, Valkenburg (1999) reported that fifty four percent of four year-olds and seventy four percent of five year-olds had already made a purchase in the presence of a parent. In relation to children's primary purchases Quinn (2002) believes the actual power children possess in relation to household purchases is debateable stating: 'money directly available to them is limited, thus reducing their purchasing power considerably' (p.9). However, this is not to suggest that children have not been given the power to make and/or influence some purchases, in effect the opposite appears to be the case.

Sabino (2002) suggests that in ten years children's economic power has increased both in terms of their family purchase influence (secondary influence) and their own spending (primary influence) (see Table 1). Nicholls and Cullen (2004) and Langer (2005) reinforce this claim that children actively participate in the consumer economy through direct self expenditure and indirectly influencing the expenditure of parents.

Table 1 The Growth of Children’s Economic Power

Children’s Economic Power (\$ Billion)	1990	1997	2000
Children’s Own Spending	6	23	28
Family Purchase Influence	50	188	286

Source: Sabino, (2002) ‘Changing Families, Changing Kids’, *Advertising and Marketing to Children*, p.10.

Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp (2001:100) state that children can be viewed as ‘active and discriminating consumers, well financed by their parents ...it can be assumed that children are consumers although not always direct buyers’. Nicholls and Cullen (2004:77) support this view stating ‘the majority of spending on children’s products was by way of adults in the form of secondary purchases’. Isler, Popper and Ward (1987) also report that not only do parents yield to children’s requests to avoid potential parent-child conflict, but also yield to please and reward children.

Typical research concerning families has focused on the ‘traditional family’ unit. Hill and Tisdall (1997:66) remark that ‘the idea of family is to some degree a fluid one, with a mix of concepts at its core; direct biological relatedness, parental caring role, long-term co-habitation and permanent belonging’. Roedder-John (1999) notes that although these historical notions concerning families have provided a beneficial overview of the family, ‘another useful analysis is to look at the family unit at a more disaggregate level’. She further stresses that ‘it is rare for consumer researchers to break down the family communications process into discrete units, such as fathers’ (Roedder-John, 1999:199). Research concerning the parent-child consumption and purchase process tends to ignore the role of fathers in contemporary families (Berey and Pollay, 1968; Ward and Wackman, 1972; Atkin, 1975(b); Galst and White, 1976; Popper, 1978; Goldberg and Gorn, 1978; Isler et al., 1987; Furnham, 2000).

The liberalisation of father-child relationships in western societies may also explain the increase in children’s influence on family decisions (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001). Previously, child rearing patterns were characterised by authority, obedience and respect (Torrance, 1998). Contemporary families are characterised by understanding, equality, negotiation and compromise, the father-child relationship is no longer regulated by authority and command but rather by negotiation (Dahlberg, 1996; Torrance, 1998; Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001).

An Interpretive Research Framework

Through an Interpretive research framework, researchers remain close to the meanings of informants, grasping commonalities and parallels in their idiographic perspectives. This is possible through grounding and continuous adherence and reference to the data set as identified (Spiggle, 1994). This form of interpretation surpasses the grasping of the meanings of informants. Through pattern recognition it constructs a representation of meanings and recurring themes producing an ‘interpretation of interpretations’ (Spiggle, 1994: 499). Interpretive groups were employed to aid the researcher ‘see the woods for the trees’. But more importantly that all emergent themes identified are rooted in the text of the respondents.

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993) emphasize that the valid functional use of purposive sampling is to maximise discovery of heterogeneous patterns and not to generalise to the broad population, thus satisfying the lack of concern interpretivists hold for generalisability. Three fathers ¹(with children aged between five and eleven) were included in the parental sample. Table 2 give an overview of the respondents and their frames of reference. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Table 2 Summary of Paternal Respondents

Name	Age	Occupation	Children (Gender, Number & Ages)
(J)	42	Butcher	Two daughters aged ten (biological) and fifteen (step daughter), one son aged nine
(W)	41	IT	One daughter aged six, one son aged eleven
(I)	44	Proprietor	Twin daughters aged five, one son aged eight

By adhering to an interpretive strategy (e.g. Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989; Thompson, 1997) data was systematically organised to reflect the multiplicity of textual details which emerged from the fathers' narratives and are presented below as a set of two thematic dimensions.

Theme 1 The Father as A Traditional Authoritarian Parent - A Time to Say No to Materialist Consumption

Throughout the data set, fathers regularly vocalise their authoritative position saying ‘No’ to their children for certain purchase requests. These direct refusal strategies are the first firm action by fathers to deflect superfluous consumption requests as they frequently portray themselves as more traditional authority figures.

- I** *I don't care, I just say 'no' and that's it. It's 'no'. It's always ah, 'Daddy I like that game', or something like that, but if it's something dreadful, or violent or anything like that, I wouldn't buy it. Full stop!*
- J** *It's a good stern 'No' stick with it yeah. Not everything is got there and then like.*

But, fathers also engage in discussion regarding purchase request refusals. In order to minimise their children's disappointment, fathers report using discussion in order to explain the reason behind the refusal. Their experiences are reflective of a ‘cruel to be kind’ mindset. They believe request refusals are made for good reasons. They report:

- W** *We have to try and explain first of all, why we say 'No', what the effect of it as such, and ah, whether it will be a good thing for them or not as such and they accept, they normally accept what we say as such.*
- J** *No, but I'd explain that to them, you'd have to like, the child would be disappointed.*

Fathers also state that, on occasion, they experience some behavioural changes in their children as a result of a purchase request refusal but it is treated as a natural occurrence and therefore an

¹ Paternal respondents represent a segment of individuals interviewed as part of a wider research agenda. In total, twenty respondents were the basis of the finalised data set.

insignificant issue. They express that any disputes which may occur are temporary, short lived occurrences, and that resultant behavioural change range from verbal displeasure to a behavioural decline encompassing physical displays of anger and disappointment. One father comments on disputes that occur and their longevity. He describes how their relationship may deteriorate, temporarily, complementing experiences of other fathers but he views it as insignificant. He states:

I Well if I say 'No' he [his son] gets a bit pissed off, but then afterwards I just play with him and that's you know, we get along well....Oh well he'd get cross,Ohhh, he got a face...he got a face that's deadly, he got a face and then he shows his cross face...Then that's it then, he doesn't go any further than that.

He comments that the dispute with his son does not escalate past dirty looks, effectively that it is forgotten about in a short period of time. He resolves the situation through play and details how 'they get along well' which can be interpreted that such refusals do not adversely affect their relationship for any prolonged period of time. With regards to the persistence of these disputes he states 'then that's it then, he doesn't go any further than that'. This reflection regarding the duration of the dispute between fathers and children is a recurring theme throughout the interviews.

W ...she [his daughter] doesn't really kind of ahh hold it against us, she doesn't stay angry for long as such...ahh ...for a minute as such, and am, but she doesn't really hold it against us....She would go away for instance...she would say it's not fair for instance, that would be one of the first things, and she would go away to her room, for that moment as such and come back later. Am but am..... no major consequences...They're quite good in that sense

Fathers view themselves as sensible and responsible in the request process in effect referring to their spouses as the 'soft target':

W I think Ann Marie [his wife] would give in easier than me. Am..Ah she is softer than me with the kids...

His use of the word 'softer' is interesting here, he portraying the image of being the disciplinarian. He judges his wife's parenting skills and thus positioning himself as superior. Interesting, considering he is involved in some decisions but not all of them. He acknowledges that his wife is the main target for requests and facilitates most of the purchases:

W 'Because at the end of the day she is probably the person more likely to make the purchase anyway'.

He appears happy to concede such decisions to his wife:

W I practically leave it to her.

In essence giving her authority to make both the decision and purchase as he feels she is in a better position to facilitate requests.

W *'I'm sure she gets a thrill from that'.*

This is said in a somewhat sarcastic tone, as earlier he recalls how his wife loves to shop. Other fathers concur with his claims of spouse as the soft target:

I *She buys it .. I would never spend so much money, all the junk...You know, there are more important things.*

Theme 2 Fathers: The Initiators of the Materialist Consumption. The Indulgent Parent?

Fathers also disclose that they occasionally indulge or reward their children with either requested or unrequested items. Interestingly, these purchases are initiated by fathers not children. There are legitimate reasons behind such purchases (such as special occasions, price and beneficial to the child) and furthermore it is acceptable to them to do so. In addressing the balance between purchases and refusals, fathers recount times where they indulge their children, but categorise it as rewards.

W *....sometimes we want to kind of reward the child with something, you know. Take home something as such. You know they're good kids as such and we are pretty much aware of that and ah, as I said, from time to time, a nice little something won't do any harm.*

He does not view rewarding or indulging his children as a big issue and does not view it as being detrimental to them *'a nice little something won't do any harm'*. So it is 'ok' to reward them, occasionally. In addition, it does not make him a 'bad' parent. If fathers believe the product is beneficial to their child and will enhance their lives in some manner they are willing to grant the purchase request.

W *Basically, firstly they would come to us, with the features and the benefits, and then of course we put that into perspective you know, within reason, and then we see what we can do and we kind of take into consideration, and then I would say perhaps, am, talk to them about it at a later date, after some consideration as such, a chat with Ann Marie[his wife] for instance, and take it from there really. Yeah, and ah, she [his daughter] would say of course, she would say what she, what it does of course, how it will benefit her.*

I *Yea, Sean [his son], Sean hardly ever asks me to buy something, anything for him Never, only when it's a magazine, he sometimes asks me to buy a magazine and I do buy a magazine for him because, I think it's nice, well then he's learning... and he can learn with that, then no problem, I will spend money on that. I see it that, if he sees it on the telly, something like one of those... those magazines that brings out a DVD or a CD, you know what I mean, that you can learn with that, even if it is a lot of money a fiver or tenner, alright, I would buy it, no problem.*

Fathers address the balance or put this into perspective by justifying to themselves and possibly to their children, that it is 'ok' to purchase certain items as long as there is sufficient rationalization.

Conclusions

Fathers exert their authoritarian position by refusing purchases with an awareness and acceptance that it may disappoint or cause disputes between them and their children, but ultimately it has no adverse effects on their relationship. These refusals are made with a justification that it is beneficial to their children rather than simply just refusing. They also claim spouses are the 'soft target', 'the one to give in'. However, they also give their spouses authority to purchase, possibly abdicating some of their duties and responsibilities as a parent. Is it possible they do not want to be viewed as the disciplinarian? Yet, they too indulge and reward their children and enter into discussion with them to reduce disappointment. Is this not indicative of a soft side? Furthermore, they initiate materialistic purchases as rewards and indulgences, balancing both refusals and purchases and their authoritarian and indulgent personas. Again justification is provided for engaging in these types of purchases. Fathers do not appear to recognise their 'soft' side and their evolution to the soft target, preferring instead to be considered the authoritarian, responsible parent. However, it is evident that fathers today are much more involved in parent-child consumption and purchases than their predecessors. Furthermore, they attempt to perpetuate a traditional view of fathers instead of addressing their contemporary roles both in families and society. These emergent findings and tensions highlight the valuable data set fathers represent in parent-child consumption and purchase explorations and as such should increasingly be considered and included for similar research studies.

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