

## Secondary Consumer Socialisation of Adults

*Torgeir Watne, Swinburne university of Technology, twatne@swin.edu.au*  
*Linda Brennan, RMIT University, lbrennan@bigpond.net.au*

### Abstract

This study investigates whether adult consumers' general predispositions towards consumption change as a result of social interaction with their adolescent children. To illustrate the concept of secondary consumer socialisation of parents by children 'Computer Related' and 'Small High-Tech' products were examined; assuming that children are likely to be more interested and better informed than their parents about these categories. The study used dyadic data analysis to investigate relationships and to assess the level of dyadic agreement about how adolescents influence their parents' consumption patterns. The findings suggest that both parents and children agree to a high level of influence and interaction about these product categories. However, the parent's interest and knowledge remains low for both categories compared with their children.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Consumer Socialisation, Product Involvement, Secondary Socialisation, Child Influence

#### Citation:

Watne, T and Brennan, L 2009, 'Secondary consumer socialisation of adults', in Dr Dewi Tejib (ed.) Proceedings of the ANZMAC 2009 Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 30 November - 2 December, pp. 1-8.

## Secondary Consumer Socialisation of Adults

### Abstract

This study investigates whether adult consumers' general predispositions towards consumption change as a result of social interaction with their adolescent children. To illustrate the concept of secondary consumer socialisation of parents by children 'Computer Related' and 'Small High-Tech' products were examined; assuming that children are likely to be more interested and better informed than their parents about these categories. The study used dyadic data analysis to investigate relationships and to assess the level of dyadic agreement about how adolescents influence their parents' consumption patterns. The findings suggest that both parents and children agree to a high level of influence and interaction about these product categories. However, the parent's interest and knowledge remains low for both categories compared with their children.

### Background and Problem Development

A common way of studying consumer behaviour is to perceive it as predominantly static and predetermined by for example social class (cf. Potter 1984; Stillerman 2004), ethnicity (cf. Goldberg 1990; Lu and Lo 2007) or gender (cf. Gao et al. 2005; Stillerman 2004). This study on the other hand, takes a socialisation perspective to consumer behaviour. The term 'consumer socialisation' was first coined by Ward in 1974. His conceptual paper argued forcefully for studying children (in particular) and their socialisation into the consumer role as an ongoing process rather than just looking at their consumer behaviour at certain age groups (Ward 1974). This particular approach suggests that consumption first and foremost is determined by continued social interaction with others – also referred to as socialisation agents. Here, consumer behaviour is viewed as a dynamic process that would be subject to change through various social learning processes throughout a person's lifecycle. Research in consumer socialisation would appear to mainly consist of studies concerning children (John 1999), although some studies have focused on the role of the family in consumer socialisation of the elderly (Mathur 1999; Smith and Moschis 1985). This study uses a consumer socialisation perspective to investigate how children may influence their parents' consumption.

The most common definition of consumer socialisation in consumer behaviour literature is the inaugural 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." Ward discusses – in the same article – that socialisation is a life-long process but offers no further definition for this. It is still an issue in this field that there seem to be no adequate definition that covers consumer socialisation as a life-long process (Ekström 2006). There is an underpinning assumption that becomes evident: while socialisation is a continuous process, it occurs in a sequential, yet discontinuous fashion. That is, it may be reciprocal and does occur as a two-way process. Individuals are socialised over time depending on societal demands and changes. This propensity to view socialisation as a one-way linear sequential process, limits the ability to understand how consumers are influenced by others in a social interaction context.

From a general sociology approach, adolescents' influence on parental behaviours has rarely been investigated (Pinquart and Silbereisen 2004). Also, in a study of culture and anthropology, Mead (1972) observed that adolescents had more influence on their parents than at any other time in the past. While it is now 2009, there is nothing to suggest that the pace of change in the social environment has slowed in the intervening period. While it would seem self evident in this era of pester power (McDermott et al. 2006) that children influence their parents, very little is known about how parents acquire new consumer information from their children (Moschis 1987).

Consumer socialisation researchers have suggested that children play an important role in socialisation of their parents (e.g. Easterling et al. 1995; Mathur 1999; Moschis 1987), but the topic largely remains under-researched (Ekström 2006). The approach in this study involves an investigation of how parents adapt to a changing marketplace, through assistance from their children. As Mathur (1999) affirms; adult consumer socialisation involves adapting to a new marketplace through social interaction. Adult consumer socialisation is important to study since little is known about how adults are socialised into new consumer roles (Ekström 2006). This form of socialisation will be different to the socialisation of a child because it builds on previous socialisation and does not assume relinquishing of previous behavioural patterns or fundamental re-learning. For the purpose of this study it will therefore be useful to address this particular form of consumer learning as *secondary consumer socialisation*.

It was Berger and Luckmann (1967), who first distinguished between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation takes place as a child, while secondary socialisation takes place after childhood (e.g. shame for nudity comes from primary socialisation, adequate dress code depends on secondary). Consumer socialisation of children can thus be seen as primary because it involves children's initial development of skills, knowledge and attitudes to function in the marketplace (cf. Ward 1974). Further, consumer socialisation of adults is concerned with the adjustment of these initial skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to adapt to new situations and can therefore be seen as secondary (cf. Mathur 1999; Pettersson et al. 2004). For example, a consumer may have learned about the function of the banking system as a child, while as an adult they learned how to use the bank more effectively by utilising internet banking.

By adding Riesman and Roseborough's (1955) distinction between 'consumption necessities' for primary socialisation and 'effective consumption' for secondary socialisation, this becomes clearer. Secondary socialisation is not concerned with necessities of consumption because necessities reflect rudimental aspects of simple survival in the marketplace. Effectiveness of consumption on the other hand, will naturally have to do with styles and moods of consumption and is therefore at the core of secondary socialisation. Secondary socialisation involves processes that induct an already [primarily] socialised individual into new sectors of the objective world of his or her' society (Berger and Luckmann 1967). From a consumer socialisation perspective, secondary socialisation would logically include adaptation to marketplace changes. It can be regarded as 'secondary consumer socialisation' if an adult consumer updates skills, knowledge or attitudes in order to be better able to function in a changing marketplace. One of the most rapidly changing contexts is that of information and communication technology (cf. Anderson et al. 2007). This rapid and discontinuous changing environment should provide a demonstration of secondary consumer socialisation of adults if such a phenomenon exists.

In a review of past research on children's relative influence in family consumption decisions, Bao (2001) found that children are more likely to be involved in those decisions in which they are the primary consumer of the focal product. This is particularly true when the product involves low financial costs (Atkin 1978; Beatty and Talpade 1994; Foxman et al. 1989). It has been suggested that children's influence increases when the product is for family usage rather than for personal use of the parent (Bao 2001). The two categories chosen for this study – small high-tech (SH) and computer related (CR) products – differ in terms of both these dimensions. CR products are more expensive than SH products and the latter category are for personal use of the parent while the former could be for family.

The child should have a higher level of influence about CR products, since they might be for the use of the whole family and not just for the parent. However, this may be moderated by how knowledgeable the child is perceived to be within the respective categories. Whether the parent would consult with the child during the purchasing process of a computer for the family or a mobile phone for themselves would also depend on the perceived expert power of the child (Cialdini 1993). The strength of the expert power of a socialisation agent (in this case the child) over a learner varies with the extent of the knowledge or perception which the learner attributes to the agent within a given area (French and Raven 1959). The learner evaluates the agent's expertness in relation to their own knowledge as well as against an absolute standard. An 'absolute standard' could in this case be (for example) the fact that the parent's friends have an equal lack of knowledge and interest with regard to the products. Thus, the children might have a high potential to influence their parents simply because they are seen as experts when it comes to understanding computer related and high-tech products.

### Method

This study has adopted the viewpoint of Moschis and Churchill (1978) who argued that a cross-sectional design is suitable for studying socialisation when focusing on the extent of agent-learner interactions. As the principle area of interest is the relationship between the viewpoints of the actors in the dyad, the form of analysis adopted was dyadic in nature. The main focus in dyadic data analysis is the assessment of the internal agreement; referred to as nonindependence (Kenny et al. 2006). If the two scores from the two members of the dyad are nonindependent, then those two scores are more similar to (or different from) one another than are two scores from two people who are not members of the same dyad. In general, a dyadic measurement reflects the contribution of two persons, although the function of those contributions is expected to be quite different in this study.

Even though dyadic research is becoming more common in social and behavioural sciences (Alferes and Kenny 2009), previous studies have focused on individuals. Even when consumer socialisation studies have been done within families, the data analyses have been focused on the individual as the unit of analysis (e.g. Buijzen and Valkenburg 2005; Carlson et al. 1994; Caruana and Vassallo 2003). Such data analysis in family dyads fails to address whether a child and a parent from the same dyad agree with each other internally on the topic of interest. An individualistic design might also overlook other valuable information; for example one will only find out whether all the children agree with each other, whether all the parents agree with each other and whether children as a whole agree with parents as a whole. We will not know how much the children agree with the parents about the topic or anything about intra-family dynamics. The most common dyadic design is one in which two persons are measured on the same set of variables (Alferes and Kenny 2009).

In our study, surveys were sent out by mail with one questionnaire for the parents and one for their adolescent son/daughter containing the same variables. The age of the responding adolescents was between 16 and 22 years. The mail questionnaires were distributed to 3750 addresses in greater Melbourne (sourced from the Australian Post Lifestyle Survey database). The mail out yield 180 usable dyads, which can be regarded as a reasonable response rate since it was self-selected and two persons from each responding family were needed for a useful response. Based on an extensive investigation of major journals that normally publish dyadic data, Kenny et al. (2006) estimated that the typical sample size for this type of study was around 80 dyads.

In previous consumer socialisation studies, measures of level of involvement in regards to certain product categories have been widely used to illustrate consumer learning. In our research, the survey was based on the well-known scale of product level involvement developed by Laurent and Kapferer (1985). This scale measured interest and pleasure about computer related (CR) and small high-tech (SH) products; the interest in the product category and the rewarding nature of the product (perceived pleasure value). Parents and children were also asked to rate their own and each others knowledge in the two categories, to assess the relative perception of their own and the other dyad member's knowledge. Further, a scale for child to parent consumption influence in the two product categories were developed for this particular study since there were no adequate measures for this in the literature. In this particular scale, the adolescents were asked about how they perceive themselves as an agent of socialisation, while the parents were asked about how they perceive this influence. Items were for example: "I give my parent advice on what computer related products they should buy" or "I buy the small high-tech products my child suggests". All scales were organised in interval levels from one to seven (strongly agree – strongly disagree).

Using the SPSS tool for dyadic analysis, results were entered dyadic (one row per dyad and not one row per individual as is usually the case) and checked for nonindependence in line with the techniques recommended by Kenny et al. (2006). Measuring nonindependence with interval-level score and distinguishable dyad members is straightforward by correlating the dyad members' score using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (Kenny et al. 2006).

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the means of parents' and children's responses to each of the dimensions in addition to the correlations (nonindependence) between the responses. The data show that there is generally a high level of agreement between the child's point of view and their parents' point of view. The strongest relationship and the highest level of agreement are between parents' and child's views on whether or not the parent is being influenced by the child with regard to consumption of CR products. The second strongest relationship is that of children's influence about SH products. It is clear that both parents and children agree that the parents adjust their purchasing to account for the child's function as a socialisation agent. The interest and pleasure parents and children get from the product categories does not appear to be strongly associated for either category. There are some lower order correlations of below 0.25 and while these are statistically significant the level of association would imply that they are potentially not practically significant. Children seem to have a higher level of knowledge than their parents about both categories. The dyads also largely agree to children's superior knowledge to their parents. There is a high level of agreement about the parent's [low]

knowledge about CR products while the agreement of parental knowledge is much lower for SH products.

**Table 1: Responses to dimensions**

Variables	N	Sig. (2-tailed)	Pearson Correlation	Mean child	Mean parent
Child/parent influence CR	179	.000	.637**	4.03	4.05
Child/parent influence SH	176	.000	.560**	4.36	4.40
Interest & Pleasure CR	179	.002	.232**	4.35	3.63
Interest & Pleasure SH	176	.029	.165*	5.07	3.73
Knowledge CR child	173	.000	.379**	4.94	5.35
Knowledge CR parent	174	.000	.552**	3.76	3.99
Knowledge SH child	175	.000	.427**	5.32	5.56
Knowledge SH parent	175	.000	.361**	3.56	3.63

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The interest and pleasure children get from SH products are higher than for CR products. This makes sense since the SH products tend to have a higher entertainment value (e.g. a printer *versus* an mp3 player). However, parents' interest with the products is only marginally different between CR products and SH products; possibly indicating that parents are equally unfamiliar with the product category and therefore less concerned overall. Further, the dyad sees the child as more knowledgeable about SH than CR products. Parents on the other hand, are less knowledgeable about SH than CR products, leaving a larger knowledge-gap in the SH category. Perhaps this leads to a higher perception of expert power of the child in the SH category, leaving the mean of influence higher than for CR products. Further, the larger dyadic agreement about the parent's category knowledge of CR products might be related to the higher agreement about influence of CR products. This might suggest that it is easier for the dyad to agree on influence level when they can agree on the parent's knowledge. On the other hand, it might also be because the CR products are largely for family use and this leads to a higher internal understanding of interaction overall than for SH products for individual use. It is also worth noticing that parents are attributing more knowledge to their children than what the children attribute to themselves, while the children are attributing less knowledge to their parents than what the parents attribute to themselves. Such a relation suggests a relatively high level of social expert power overall in both categories.

## Conclusion

The results show that the dyads are well aware of, and agreeable about, the level of influence children have on their parents in terms of consumption. Furthermore, the greatest levels of influence are exerted when the child is interested and knowledgeable about the products. While this is potentially not surprising, it is pertinent to note that both parents and children have a high degree of agreement about this influence. It is clear that both the parents and the children believe that parents adjust their purchasing behaviour to account for the child's function as a socialisation agent. In addition, children's involvement and knowledge with SH products is more instrumental than CR products in children's influence strategies. A lack of familiarity by the parents in both categories may be a component in allowing children to have greater levels of influence overall. Also, it seems evident that the parent's interest and knowledge remain low, and that they are happy to take the child's expert advice without necessarily adjusting their own knowledge or attitude about these products. What impact this might have on consumers over time lies for future research to investigate.

## References

- Alferes, V R & Kenny, D A 2009, 'SPSS programs for the measurement of nonindependence in standard dyadic designs,' *Behavior Research Methods*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 47-54.
- Anderson, B, Brynin, M, Raban, Y & Gershuny, J 2007, *Information and Communications Technologies in Society: E-living in a Digital Europe*, Taylor & Francis, Hoboken, N.J.
- Atkin, C K 1978, 'Observation of parent-child interaction in supermarket decision-making,' *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 41-45.
- Bao, Y 2001, *Effects of Parental Style and Power on Adolescent's Influence in Family Consumption Decisions*, Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, pp. 197.
- Beatty, S E & Talpade, S 1994, 'Adolescent Influence in Family Decision Making: A Replication with Extension,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 332-341.
- Berger, P L & Luckmann, T 1967, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Allen Lane the Penguin Press, London.
- Buijzen, M & Valkenburg, P M 2005, 'Parental Mediation of Undesired Advertising Effects,' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 153-165.
- Carlson, L, Walsh, A, Laczniak, R N & Grossbart, S 1994, 'Family communication patterns and marketplace motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of children and mothers,' *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 25.
- Caruana, A & Vassallo, R 2003, 'Children's perception of their influence over purchases: the role of parental communication patterns,' *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 55-66.
- Cialdini, R 1993, *Influence: the psychology of persuasion*, Morrow, New York.
- Easterling, D, Miller, S & Weinberger, N 1995, 'Environmental Consumerism: A Process of Children's Socialization and Families' Resocialization,' *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 12, no. 6, pp. 531-550.
- Ekström, K M 2006, 'Consumer Socialization Revisited', in Belk, R W (ed) *Research in Consumer Behavior*, vol. 10, Elsevier Science Ltd., Oxford: UK, pp. 71-98.
- Foxman, E R, Tansuhaj, P S & Ekström, K M 1989, 'Adolescents' influence in family purchase decisions: A socialization perspective,' *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 159-172.
- French, J R P J & Raven, B 1959, 'The bases of social power', in Cartwright, D (ed) *Studies in Social Power*, University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan, pp. 150-167.
- Gao, G, Veeman, M & Adamowicz, W 2005, 'Consumers' search behaviour for GM food information,' *Journal of Public Affairs (14723891)*, vol. 5, no. 3/4, pp. 217-225.
- Goldberg, M E 1990, 'A Quasi-Experiment Assessing the Effectiveness of TV Advertising Directed to Children,' *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 445-454.
- John, D R 1999, 'Consumer socialization of children: A retrospective look at twenty-five years of research,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 183-213.
- Kenny, D A, Kashy, D A & Cook, W L 2006, *Dyadic data analysis*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Laurent, G & Kapferer, J-N 1985, 'Measuring Consumer Involvement Profiles,' *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 41-53.

- Lu, W & Lo, L 2007, 'Immigrant grocery-shopping behavior: ethnic identity versus accessibility,' *Environment & Planning A*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 684-699.
- Mathur, A 1999, 'Adoption of technological innovations by the elderly: a consumer socialization perspective,' *Journal of Marketing Management (10711988)*, vol. 9, no. 3, Winter, pp. 21-35.
- McDermott, L, O'Sullivan, T, Stead, M & Hastings, G 2006, 'International food advertising, pester power and its effects,' *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 513-539.
- Mead, M 1972, *Culture and commitment: a study of the generation gap*, Panther, London.
- Moschis, G P 1987, *Consumer Socialization: A Life-Cycle Perspective*, Lexington Books, Lexington, Massachusetts.
- Moschis, G P & Churchill, G A 1978, 'Consumer Socialization: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis,' *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 599-609.
- Pettersson, A, Olsson, U & Fjellström, C 2004, 'Family life in grocery stores – a study of interaction between adults and children,' *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 317-328.
- Pinquart, M & Silbereisen, R, K. 2004, 'Transmission of values from adolescents to their parents: the role of value content and authoritative parenting,' *Adolescence*, vol. 39, no. 153, pp. 83-100.
- Potter, R B 1984, 'Consumer Behavior and Spatial Cognition in Relation to the Extraversion-Introversion Dimension of Personality,' *Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 123, no. 1, pp. 29-34.
- Riesman, D & Roseborough, H 1955, 'Careers and Consumer Behavior', in Clark, L H (ed) *Consumer Behavior: The Life Cycle and Consumer Behavior*, vol. II, New York University Press, New York, pp. 1-18.
- Smith, R B & Moschis, G P 1985, 'A Socialization Perspective on Selected Consumer Characteristics of the Elderly,' *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 1, Summer, pp. 74-95.
- Stillerman, J 2004, 'Gender, Class and Generational Contexts for Consumption in Contemporary Chile,' *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 51-78.
- Ward, S 1974, 'Consumer Socialization,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 1-14.