



Parental style and consumer socialization among adolescents: A cross-cultural investigation



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines how parental style affects consumer socialization in a cross-national context, focusing on family communication orientation, adolescents' use of influence strategies, susceptibility to peer influence, and impulse buying tendency. Multiple-informant data from each family (i.e., father, mother, and adolescent) are used in the analysis. The findings suggest that Chinese adolescents, compared with their Canadian counterparts, use less bilateral influence strategies (reasoning, bargaining), but more unilateral influence strategies (playing on emotions, stubborn persuasion); they are also less susceptible to peer influence, and have less impulse buying tendency. Across both cultures, authoritarian parents are more socio-oriented than authoritative, permissive, and neglectful parents, whereas authoritative and permissive parents are more concept-oriented than authoritarian and neglectful parents. Furthermore, adolescents with authoritative and permissive parents more likely use bilateral influence strategies than those with authoritarian parents, while adolescents with neglectful parents use more unilateral influence strategies than those with other parental styles. These findings provide novel insights on market segmentation and international marketing practices.

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1. Introduction

Consumer socialization is the processes through which consumption-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes are transferred from one generation to another (Ward, 1974). These processes encompass socialization agent–learner relationships and modes of learning. Prior socialization studies mainly associated parental style with consumer socialization outcomes among children, including children's consumption independence, role in family decision-making, television viewing, advertisement puffery filtering, and substance use (Carlson & Grossbart, 1988; Rose, 1999; Yang & Schaninger, 2010).

There are several gaps in the literature. First, few examined the association between parental style and children's use of influence strategies. Less is known about adolescents' use of influence strategies (Palan & Wilkes, 1997). The type of influence strategy adolescents use reflects how successful they are as influence agents in family decision making (Bao, Fern, & Sheng, 2007). For John (1999), children's

use of influence strategies is affected by the type and quality of parent–child interactions. However, no attempt has been made to test this proposition among children or adolescents. A better understanding of the link between parental style and adolescents' use of influence strategies helps marketers to: (1) determine whether to target parents or adolescents, and (2) segment the market according to parental style and develop effective marketing campaigns.

Second, prior socialization research primarily focused on the US marketplace. Little research on consumer socialization is conducted in other countries. Consumer socialization, as a profile of social realities, is a cultural process (Laroche, Yang, Kim, & Richard, 2007). Understanding cross-national difference in consumer socialization provides marketers with a global competitive advantage. Finally, previous studies examining parental influence on consumer socialization were disproportionately based on data from one informant per family (i.e., mothers). This practice created a gap in understanding the: (1) differences in parental styles between mothers and fathers, and (2) differences in parental styles practiced with boys versus girls.

To address these gaps, we examine parental style and adolescents' use of influence strategies cross-nationally (Canada vs. China). Canadians and Chinese are different in their core values and cultural dimensions, suggesting cultural differences in child-rearing practices and socialization processes. To get a holistic view of national differences in socialization, in addition to adolescents' use of influence strategies, other relevant

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variables are also examined, including susceptibility to peer influence, impulse buying tendency, and family communication orientation.

Marketing researchers find susceptibility to peer influence to affect adolescents' substance use (Yang, Schaninger, & Laroche, 2013). Developmental psychologists suggest that adolescents' susceptibility to antisocial peer pressure such as shoplifting is affected by parental styles (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Extending these studies, we examine the effect of parental style on susceptibility to peer influence on consumption-related issues. Impulse buying tendency is another outcome variable of interest for its potential links to parental style. It is associated with poor decision making and excessive unplanned spending (Kim, Yang, & Lee, 2009). Besides, we examine the possible links between parental style and family communication orientation, an aspect of parent–adolescent interaction which was associated with adolescents' influence in family purchases, consumption autonomy, attitudes toward advertising, and use of alternative shopping channels (Carlson, Grossbart, & Walsh, 1990).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Cross-national socialization differences

Socialization is rooted in the sociocultural soil. Culture guides the direction and trend of socialization goals and parental behaviors. The goal in Western cultures is to develop an individual sense of identity and self-sufficiency away from family members (Triandis, 1995). With this foundation, teenagers are well-prepared for adulthood and make decisions for themselves with less reference to family expectations. Even with family expectations, a sense of honor and integrity is attached to those who are able to follow their own initiatives and achieve their goals. By contrast, the socialization in Eastern cultures is to: 1) help adolescents learn to control individualistic acts and reduce unique individual characteristics; 2) develop collectivistic ideology and cooperative skills and behavior including obedience, conformity and interdependence; 3) become part of the larger group and make contributions to the achievement and welfare of the collective (Chen, 2000; Triandis, 1995).

Socialization goal differences are manifested through cultural dimensions, including collectivism–individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and sex-role orientation. Compared to Canada, China has more collectivism, power distance, less uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity (Hofstede, 1983). Culture significantly affects advertising and consumer goods, and exerts great impact on socialization processes and outcomes (Laroche et al., 2007). For example, collectivism drives Asians to exhibit high-context communication patterns, whereas Canadians prefer low-context styles due to their individualism. This explains why advertisements in Canada use explicit codes, whereas Chinese ads are implicit and indirect. Therefore, it is theoretically significant and managerially important to understand how socialization goal differences are transferred to consumption-related behaviors among adolescents' use of influence strategies, susceptibility to peer influence, and impulsive buying.

2.1.1. Adolescents' use of influence strategies

One facet of socialization involves learning ways of becoming successful agents of influence through the use of sophisticated influence and negotiation strategies (John, 1999). Kim, Lee, and Hall (1991) identified five influence strategies adolescents use: persuasion, stop eating, act stubbornly, approach the other parent, and playing on emotions. Palan and Wilkes (1997) identified seven influence strategies: bargaining, stubborn persuasion, playing on emotions, request, expert, legitimate, and directive. The literature suggests that these strategies can be classified into two categories: unilateral and bilateral strategies (Bao et al., 2007; Offerman & Schrier, 1985). The former is one-sided; the latter is bidirectional and dynamic (Cowan & Avants, 1988). Typical unilateral strategies include direct request, stubborn persuasion, stop eating, and playing on emotions, whereas exemplar bilateral strategies

are reasoning, bargaining, sweet talk, and coalition (Bao et al., 2007; Offerman & Schrier, 1985).

We expect Chinese adolescents to use less bilateral but more unilateral strategies than Canadian adolescents. Bilateral strategies are more likely used when parents and adolescents have an egalitarian relationship. In Western societies, individuals are responsible for their own progress in the social hierarchy. It is acceptable and encouraged that adolescents negotiate with their parents to get their way. However, compared to Canada, China has greater power distance and a hierarchical relationship between parents and children (Hofstede, 1983). It is uncommon for parents to share power with children in making decisions; rather, obedience and conformity are the most important virtues in Chinese culture (Yang & Laroche, 2011). Therefore, after parents say “no”, the negotiating door is often closed, leaving little room for the adolescents to use bilateral strategies.

H1a. Adolescents' use of bilateral influence strategies is lower in Chinese than in Canadian families.

H1b. Adolescents' use of unilateral influence strategies is higher in Chinese than in Canadian families.

2.1.2. Adolescents' susceptibility to peer influence

It is defined as individuals' tendency to look for standards from peers in developing their own motivations, attitudes, and behavior (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). Peer influence is especially important during adolescence, a time when individuals are susceptible to ideas and trends popular among their peers (Yang & Laroche, 2011). Since Canadian adolescents are socialized to be independent and self-reliant, while Chinese adolescents are socialized to be interdependent and value harmonious relationships with others, Canadian adolescents should have a less degree of susceptibility to peer influence than their Chinese counterparts.

H2. Susceptibility to peer influence is lower for Canadian than for Chinese adolescents.

However, some literature suggests the opposite, i.e., Canadian adolescents may be more susceptible to peer influence than Chinese adolescents. Canadian adolescents are expected to decide for themselves on a variety of issues, such as choice of a boyfriend/girlfriend, marriage, and career. They are responsible for any adverse consequence arising from these decisions. So, they are “freely” influenced by their peers. Yet, Chinese adolescents are not encouraged to make decisions on these life events. According to Confucius, it is immoral for Chinese adolescents to choose a mate or decide on a career path without parental consent (Yang & Laroche, 2011). Parents protect, govern, teach and discipline their children and have the last say in their life decisions. Thus, when adolescents fail in their life or careers, they are not blamed; rather, their parents must take responsibility for their failures (Chen, 2000). Consequently, Chinese parents expect their children to have earlier independence in task-oriented caretaking activities and academic work, but later in social and self-initiated tasks (Rose, 1999). Forced compliance is accepted and self-sacrifice is expected from a filial person. In such environments, although Chinese adolescents are willing to sacrifice their personal goals for good relationships with others, they less likely follow their peers in doing things that their parents may disapprove. Peers are at the same level of the social ladder, whereas parents are in a higher position than children. Society grants parents the power to provide guidance to their offsprings and punish them for any inappropriate conduct.

H2alt. Susceptibility to peer influence is higher for Canadian than for Chinese adolescents.

2.1.3. Impulse buying tendency

It is consumers' likelihood to make unplanned, immediate, and unreflecting purchases (Rook & Fisher, 1995). We expect Canadian adolescents to have higher impulse buying tendencies than their Chinese

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