

Children's influence in family decision-making: Examining the impact of the changing American family

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Abstract

Over the past thirty years, the structure of the traditional American family has changed markedly. Significant trends include older parents, delayed marriages, postponed childbearing, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. These profound social changes have had a significant impact on the lives of children and have conspired to change the child influence patterns often cited in the family decision-making literature. Results from two contemporary samples of 1463 families suggest that consideration should be given to the changing structure of the family and the type of product when identifying the characteristics which moderate children's influence.

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1. Introduction

Since 1968, several studies have examined how children's influence varies by a number of variables, including type of product, decision-making stages, parental attitudes, and characteristics of the child and the family unit. These studies were largely published in the 1970s and 1980s, making our accumulated knowledge of child purchase influence patterns heavily dependent on studies conducted over two decades ago. Since that time, little attention has been given to determine how current changes in the social environment may have affected these findings.

The lack of recent attention to validation of historical findings is a shortcoming in light of the dramatic changes in the family over the past decades. These changes have been documented and lamented by a large number of diverse authoritative sources. Clulow (1993) predicted some of these shifts from a "traditional" family to a "new" family environment (see Table 1).

In the "new" family, children encounter decision-making at an earlier age and are taking on greater roles and responsibilities in family purchases. Recent research indicates that children's influence extends far beyond what is traditionally thought to

only include areas where children were primary product users. Children have been found to have strong influence on non-traditional areas such as home décor, automobiles, and home electronics (e.g., Meyers, 2004; Roy, 2004). In a Nickelodeon study, nine out of ten parents said their children's brand preferences for technical products carried significant weight in the decision, with 30% indicating that children's opinions were given "major importance" (Miller, 1999). Further, parents in the Nickelodeon study acknowledged deferring to children in areas where the children were considered to be more knowledgeable than their parents, such as sports and beverages. Other research reports that children's influence on parental spending has increased 54% since 1997 (Hunter, 2002), with children influencing 80% of family food spending. Finally, Cooper (1999) reports that in 43% of their purchases, parents requested input from their children.

Another indication of change in the family is that children are increasingly being socialized by agents external to the family. The percentage of children living in homes where both parents are working has doubled over the past 25 years (Francisco, 1999). With women increasingly entering the work force, children spend a large portion of their formative years in out-of-home settings or alone. Children are also faced with an unprecedented technological environment. For example, 47% of children aged 2–18 have a television in their bedroom. These

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Table 1
Changes in families^a

Traditional family	“New” family	Possible implications for child purchase influence
Families as producers	Families as consumers	Children encounter consumption decisions earlier
Multi-member households	Limited member households	Due to the changing family structure (postponed childbearing, single parents, etc.), households are smaller
Hierarchical relationships	Horizontal relationships	Family decision-making is more egalitarian, with children having more equality in the family; children are taking on more decision-making responsibility
Collective values	Individual values	Children form values as a result of external influences
Biological family ties	Social family ties	Families are no longer necessarily biologically related, changing traditional familial roles
Unpaid care	Paid care	Children encounter non-family socialization agents earlier
Differentiated relationships	Fused relationships	Stereotypical family decision-making forms are declining
Rights	Responsibilities	Children are achieving equal-shareholder status
Belonging	Isolation	Children make more decisions autonomously

^a Adapted from Clulow (1993).

children are consuming an average of 5.5 h a day using media such as television, print, and the computer (Dotson and Hyatt, 2005). In fact, the marked pace of technological change and educational development has left many children more knowledgeable than their parents (Francisco, 1999). As a result, children not only have greater input, but their input is being shaped by unmatched access to external socialization agents.

Other changes in the structure of the traditional family have elevated children's decision-making status. For example, in 1998, for the first time in our history, the majority of first born children (53%) were born to unmarried mothers (Eckel, 1999). In fact, single-parent families are growing at a record rate. In 1970, 3.4 million families were single-parent households; in 2000, 17.3 million households were headed by single parents. Forty percent of women who have never married in their 30s have a child. Single parents accounted for \$174 billion in expenditures. Similarly, in 1970, only 10.6% of the total households were single-parent families, compared to 16% in 2000 (Gutierrez, 2002). In these single-parent homes, children are uniquely positioned to be equal participants in family decisions.

Other signs of the decline in the traditional family include divorce and delayed child birth. The number of marriages ending in divorce quadrupled from 1970 to 1998, from 4.3 million to 19.4 million, leaving the population of divorcees at an all time high (Eckel, 1999). Young adults are waiting longer to marry and are delaying child birth, with the median age of first marriage for men averaging 26.8 years in 2000, compared to 23.2 in 1970. Women's median age at first marriage in 2000 was 25.1, compared to 20.8 in 1970 (Gutierrez, 2002). In addition to waiting longer to marry, young adults are cohabitating without marrying. Compared to 1970, cohabitation increased 137% in

2000, increasing from 1.6 million households to 3.8 million households.

All combined, these trends lead to fewer traditional, dual parent households. In 1970, 40.3% of the U.S. households were married with children, compared to only 24.1% of the households in 2000. The evidence of profound changes in families is irrefutable. These changes and implications collectively suggest that in today's family, children are faced with a different decision-making environment. Social forces, demographic shifts, and changes in parents' attitudes have all worked to increase the child's status as an active decision-maker. In fact, children may have more absolute decision-making influence than ever before.

The objective of this research is to examine the degree to which early findings regarding children's influence in purchase decision-making are still generalizable today. To do so, two theoretical frameworks are identified, a review of the literature of children's purchase influence is summarized and hypotheses are generated and tested with two samples, totaling 1463 families.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Resource theory and consumer socialization theory guided the development of the hypotheses in this research (see Table 2 for a summary).

2.1. Resource theory

Resource theory is a conceptual framework for understanding sources of power which may be employed in social interactions. Resources are “anything that one partner may make available to the other, helping the latter to satisfy his needs or attain his goals” (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). Foa (1993) further expounded on resource exchange as the ability of individuals to satisfy their physical and psychological needs via social interaction. He specified the importance of six types of social resources: love (an expression of affectionate regard, warmth, or comfort), services (activities on the body or belongings of a person which often constitute labor for another), goods (tangible products, objects, or materials), money (any coin, currency, or token which has some standard unit of exchange value), information (advice, opinions, instruction, or enlightenment), and status (an expression of evaluative judgment which conveys high or low prestige, regard, or esteem). The amount and value of resources possessed by an individual has a direct, positive relationship with the amount of power possessed by the individual and, therefore, a direct effect on the influence a person may exert in decision-making (Blood and Wolfe, 1960).

In family decision-making, resource theory has been suggested as an explanation for spousal dominance in decision-making. Studies have found that the partner with greater resources (as often measured by education, occupation and income) has the greater power in decision-making (e.g., Blood and Wolfe, 1960). Researchers have also recognized the viability of a resource explanation for the changing role of children in family decision-making.

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