



## Child socialization practices: Implications for retailers in emerging markets

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### ABSTRACT

Considering the unprecedented growth in the active role of children in the modern market place the present paper attempts to understand the potential of kids as consumers in an emerging retail market. The exploratory study uses a quota sample of 136 urban Indian parents to assess their attitude towards parenting and child socialization along with their preferences for retail formats while buying across select children's product categories. The empirical evidences of the research established the active and positive role of the urban Indian parents in the child's consumer socialization process and acknowledge the growing status of a child as an influencer and independent buyer with respect to select product categories in the market. The study reiterates on the positive correlation between the child's age and the strength of his influence on family purchase decisions. The paper significantly contributes with its insights on contemporary consumers to aid retailers with relevant marketing knowledge pertaining to the market of children and their parents in emerging India.

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### 1. Introduction

Globalization transformed the world where consumerism is the new religion and children are its most devout followers (Unnikrishnan and Bajpai, 1996). The advent of the television and other forms of media have converted children as consumers in their own right (Pecora, 1995); marking a shift from their status of being just an extension of their parent's purchasing power (Wimalasiri, 2004). Hence, the active role of children in the consumer space has been the focus of many recent research (Ironico, 2012) that concentrate on recommending new marketing practices and communication strategies for retailers interested in targeting children and their families (Parment, 2013; Erasmus et al., 2014).

Trends like families with fewer children, increasing number of working couples or single parents, greater exposure to media across the globe contributed to the unprecedented growth of the youth market in developed countries that was followed by similar trends in the developing markets (Wimalasiri, 2004). Today, the growing concern of the parents to provide their children with greater opportunities to choose amongst alternatives (McNeal, 1987; McNeal and Yeh, 2003) gives impetus to their growing

recognition and acceptance of the legitimacy of their children's desires and needs (Cook, 2009). The rise of the knowing, active child makes the need to understand the central role of children and their parents in creating, diffusing and legitimizing marketing and retail practices around purchase of child oriented products all the more pertinent (Kervenoael et al., 2011).

In terms of pure vested business interest as well, it is important to consider the growing importance of kids as consumers in the modern market. Today's children, especially the older ones, possess more economic clout than their predecessors and have reported the fastest rising spending power particularly in the developed Western markets (Grant and Stephen, 2005). In the developing markets the trends are similar where children are no longer passive observers in the market (Wimalasiri, 2004). Indian children, constituting around a fifth of the world's children, offer an estimated \$1110 million market for products meant for children with a potential for further growth (Kaur and Singh, 2006). This gets further reinforced by research findings that indicate the notable effect of children on their parents' buying and shopping behavior across all products irrespective of whether it is meant for the child's own use or not (Chaudhary and Gupta, 2012).

Before generalizing the findings across geographies it may be prudent to consider two perspectives on child consumer that may also be relevant in an emerging market context. First, it is important to understand that one cannot undermine the role of the parent in the consumer socialization of the child (Beyda, 2010),

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especially in a collectivistic society like India. Second, it is imperative to understand whether the parent-gatekeeper is open towards accepting retail strategies directed towards the child. Hence, consideration of parental buying patterns and co-shopping practices (Keller and Ruus, 2014) of parents and their children that determine the buying process of the child as a consumer in his/her own right is fundamental to the present study. The paper adopts the perspective of a preliminary exploration towards understanding children as an increasingly important consumer segment in emerging retail markets like India.

## 2. Academic perspectives on consumer socialization of the child

Consumer behavior is complex (Grant and Stephen, 2005) and study of child-centric consumer behavior is no exception (Banister and Booth, 2005). Growing importance of children as an important primary market (McNeal, 1992; Salinsky, 2006) and their crucial role as influencers in the marketplace (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001; Pettersson et al., 2004) have led to studies on children's consumer behavior within the paradigm of consumer socialization. It is accepted that the children learn their consumer related skills, knowledge and attitudes through interaction with various social agents in specific social settings, a process known as consumer socialization (Ward, 1974) or consumer development (McNeal, 1992). Where consumer socialization is defined as "the process by which young people acquire skills knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their effective functioning as consumers in the place" (Ward, 1974), the interaction could include other family members like the grandparents (Beyda, 2010) and peers or organizations like schools and retailers (Moschis, 1985). The retailers themselves also play a significant role in consumer socialization of children (Dotson and Hyatt, 2005; Drenten et al., 2008). They contribute to children's formation of attitudes, values and behavioral patterns including in-store shopping behavior through various policies and operation procedures which include in-store, mass media and interpersonal sources (McNeal and Ji, 1999).

It is quite inadvertently assumed, and rightly so, that the family has the biggest influence in the child's learning to become a rational consumer (Moschis, 1987). Parents play the role of mentors by prohibiting or alternately allowing the child in experiential learning or acting as role models that induces child's consumption related knowledge around varied cues like prices, comparative shopping, brands and much more (Ward et al., 1977; Moschis et al., 1986; Pliner et al., 1994). Recognizing the significance of parents in shaping the consumption values and patterns (Chan and Prendergast, 2007) of the child, it becomes important to study the decision making process followed by the parent, especially for products and services meant for the child.

## 3. Changing role of the child and the resulting child–parent interface in family decision making

Liberalization of the parent–child relationship might have its root in the western societies (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001) but changing income and educational levels, insurgence of single parent families or dual income families have changed the parental attitude towards child rearing significantly across the world (Thiagarajan et al., 2009; Torrance, 1998). This results in greater maturation of the child as a consumer in the modern market as the opinions and participation of the child in purchase decision are being taken seriously like never before (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Considering research by Darian (1998) and Ebster et al.

(2009), the highly collaborative in-store behavior of the new age parents suggests far reaching insights on the growing acceptability and positive attitude of parents towards the child as an active consumer.

The new models of family decision making (Wut and Chou, 2013) recognize the necessity of synergy between buying preferences of all members of the family, including children. As children and parents shop together they adopt different interaction strategies ranging from refusal to negotiation and agreement (Erasmus et al., 2014; Keller and Ruus, 2014). Influencing techniques like "pester power" take on more sophisticated approaches as the child grows older (Nicholls and Cullen, 2004). Though the potential child–parent conflict can be a concern for the retailers yet it is not absolute and increases only with the increasing direct interest of the child in the product categories, as for clothes, toys and food (Erasmus et al., 2014; Stoltman et al., 1999). The parents' perception and attitude towards the role of children as influencers are an important determinant of the conflict where the more open parents would have a greater tolerance towards the independent preferences of the child (Nicholls and Cullen, 2004). Keller and Ruus (2014) reported on the basis of an observational study of grocery purchase that co-shopping by parents and the child clearly demonstrates the existence of a two-way socialization process. Parents are increasingly becoming sensitive to the need of balancing the act of active and responsible mentoring as they initiate the child into consumption culture (Pugh, 2009).

However, convergence of consumer behavior is still a distant reality and the global consumption patterns are unevenly distributed across markets and cultures (Kragh and Djursaa, 2001). Hence, consumer socialization varies across culture, especially between developed and developing markets. Variations in parental socialization practice affect a child's socialization (Kim et al., 2009). Taking examples from the market in US and India, the difference in their respective parental sensitivities towards child rearing is much expected. Children reared by parents in the US are conditioned to be individualistic and more independent than their counterparts in the East (Kim et al., 2009). The Indian children are assumed to be somewhat closer to their Chinese counterparts, who are raised to believe in the importance of fostering respect for parental authority and family harmony (Xu et al., 2005). Therefore, the empirical research conducted in the context of the developed markets often fail to address and assess the specific ground realities pertaining to emerging markets like India (Chaudhary and Gupta, 2012). Contemporary researchers like Chaudhary and Gupta (2012) and D'Silva et al. (2007) hint at the relevance of considering a timely and specific exploration on the influence of children as evolving consumers in the emerging Indian market to assist retailers looking for opportunities in the segment. It is proposed that, though the child–parent interface in household decision making is evolving, there are unique nuances that exist in the context of emerging markets.

## 4. Is it the child or the kid? Evidences from literature

It is meaningful to consider that the development of the children's consumer behavior would vary according to the cognitive development associated with their physical age (Parment, 2013). According to Valkenburg and Cantor (2001) the development of the child consumers occurs in four distinct phases:

- (1) Infants and toddlers (0–2 years) who gradually get conscious of their wants and firmly express their preferences (Bartsch and Wellman, 1995). By two years they are able to take products from the retailer's shelves (McNeal, 1992) and

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