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Parents and children in supermarkets: Incidence and influence

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ABSTRACT

Children influence up to a fifth of all household purchase decisions, yet little is known about how this influence is brought to bear. This research looks at the primary householder purchase context of grocery shopping and establishes the incidence of children accompanying adult shoppers. It identifies the effect of their presence on the spend, time taken to complete the trip and the route taken in-store. More than 33,000 observations are analysed, using exit interviews and structured observation of the in-store location of shoppers across two Australian states and four grocery retail outlets.

Refuting the commonly held assertion that taking children shopping makes you spend more, accompanied shoppers do not spend more than unaccompanied shoppers, but rather shop 15% faster, tending to avoid busy areas in-store.

We establish that, on average, 17% of grocery store shoppers are accompanied by children. Children are seen to accompany adults on both small and larger spend grocery shopping trips. Men, who are known to grocery shop less frequently than women, are found to have a lower incidence of being accompanied by a child when they do shop.

This has implications for store layout and services offered. Products for children and parents need to be placed in areas where parents are more comfortable (that is, less busy areas), but also merchandised in ways that make it easy for parents to shop at their faster pace. The balance of these two needs is a direction for future research.

1. Introduction

Children have a key influence on household purchasing behaviour, with their preferences being taken into account in an estimated fifth of all purchase decisions; the greatest influence being found for lower value and own consumption decisions (McNeal, 1992). Defining children broadly as anyone under the age of 18 years of age, this represents a group of 604 million people in the East Asia/Pacific region (Hsieh et al., 2006) and constitutes approximately 25% of the Australian population. A primary context for influence is supermarket shopping. Children have been estimated to physically accompany adults shopping in 20 per cent of supermarket visits, with parents who were accompanied by children spending, on average, 25 per cent more (Thomas and Garland, 1993). So, a realistic estimate may be that toddlers to teenagers influence at least $17bn worth of supermarket revenue in Australia alone (IBISWorld, 2011) – which does not include the considerable potential for influence children may hold outside of the store and across other purchasing contexts.

While knowledge exists regarding the in-store behaviour of adult shoppers (e.g. Hui et al., 2009a; Hui et al., 2013; Sorensen, 2012; Sorensen et al., 2017; Sorensen and Suher, 2010) far less is known about children's in-store behaviours. The research on children in-store has generally related to their product requests (e.g. Atkin, 1978; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008; Gram, 2015) and children's education as consumers and response to advertising (see John, 1999 for a foundational review of the topic). As a result, little understanding exists as to the influence of children on their parents' overall shopping behaviour. This paper uses known benchmarks for in-store patterns of shopper behaviour to compare grocery shopping with and without children. We investigate the incidence of adult shoppers taking a child with them to the store, and how their spend differs from non-accompanied shoppers. We examine if shoppers with children shop a store differently in terms of

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time, spend, and navigation. These questions are fundamental for manufacturers and retailers to know as they influence a range of decisions from how stores are stocked and laid out through to aids, such as children's' trolleys and play areas, that may be used to assist the shopper.

2. Literature and research questions

Because little has been researched and reported about the behaviours of children accompanying adults grocery shopping, fundamental observational research is a useful first step in knowledge development. Observational research about general shopper behaviour has found repeating patterns (e.g Sorensen, 2009; Sorensen et al., 2017; Underhill, 1999) and such descriptive research is the first step in theory development (Ehrenberg, 1994). Without a sound basis in observed reality, theory runs the risk of merely reflecting the researcher's preconceived notions (Rust, 1993). Generalisations about how shoppers behave in a store, such as the navigation paths typically adopted, provide behavioural norms for marketers, retailers, and researchers. Just as architects should work within the laws of physics, marketers and retailers should tailor their offerings to work with rather than against these clear behavioural patterns. Given the intensity of competition in the retail sector (Knox and Denison, 2000; Leszczyc et al., 2000), retailers and manufacturers who understand the fundamental patterns of shopper behaviour and adapt their practices will have a competitive edge.

Prior research about children and parents in supermarkets has focused on product requests and parental reactions (e.g. Atkin, 1978; Holden, 1983; Isler et al., 1987). Detailed observations of parents and children in supermarkets and clothing stores have led to an understanding of shopping as a negotiation, rather than adversarial, process as an appropriate conceptualization (Darian, 1998; Gram, 2015). The current research focus on product requests and parental reactions focuses the prior work on just one part of the store or product category (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008; Gaumer and Arnone, 2010; O'Dougherty et al., 2006), as opposed to the overall patterns of shopping behaviour such as store navigation and spend. This paper addresses that gap.

Even given the existing body of knowledge about the activities of children and parents in store (e.g. Atkin, 1978; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008; Darian, 1998; Gaumer and Arnone, 2010; Gram, 2015; Holden, 1983; Wells and Lo Sciuto, 1966), no research in the last 20 years has determined the incidence of accompanied shoppers in the retail grocery setting – yet this is one of the key settings for family expenditure (Isler et al., 1987). A reason for this gap is that prior recent research in stores used convenience samples of either shoppers entering an aisle (e.g. Atkin, 1978; Gaumer and Arnone, 2010), or pre-arranged trips with shoppers (e.g. Holden, 1983), both of which are biased samples. While this has yielded knowledge about the ways in which children and parents interact in stores, it has not allowed researchers to understand the basic prevalence of shopping with children. As a first step, we systematically sample the shoppers entering retail grocery stores to obtain an estimate of the prevalence of children and how this may vary in relation to the demographic make-up of the stores's catchment area.

Focus group research has found adults take longer to complete a shop when they have children with them, and that they would generally prefer not to take children shopping with them as it is stressful and exhausting (Pettersson et al., 2004; Wilson and Wood, 2004). This supports other findings that nearly two-thirds of parents report having problems managing their children in-store (Sanders and Hunter, 1984) and that makes both activities more difficult (see Craig, 2006; Holden, 1983). It seems that when a child is present, habitual behaviours may change (Drèze and Hoch, 1998). In the only research to directly compare the spend and duration of shopping trips with and without children, Thomas and Garland (1993) found that shoppers on their self-defined "regular" weekly grocery shop spent 24% more ($124 rather than $100), and took 10% longer than the "average" shopper when they had accompanying children (34 versus 31 min). However, the findings did not account for the household composition: families with more people necessarily need more food and this may explain the noted variation. They also only had a small sample on which they based these findings (54 shoppers with children and 232 without).

An additional characteristic of most research about adults in-store with children is that the focus has been on female adult shoppers. This is understandable given they are the main grocery retail shopper. However, the nature of fatherhood has undergone significant change in the last decade (Nash and Basini, 2008; Yeung et al., 2001). Fathers are more often sharing responsibilities (Silver, 2000), or staying home to rear children (Fields, 2004), and are spending more time with their children than ever before (Gauthier et al., 2004). Mothers go shopping with their children up to four times as often as fathers (O'Dougherty et al., 2006; Pettersson et al., 2004), though it is not known if this incidence varies by trip length (e.g. quick or slow) or type (e.g. top up versus big shop) and how these metrics may have changed in the last 10 years.

Given that shopping with a child present is more difficult (Sanders and Hunter, 1984), it is reasonable to expect that being accompanied shopping means it will take longer to buy the same number of items. Social facilitation theory predicts that the larger the group, the more resources consumed, and the longer the time spent on an activity (Sommer et al., 1992). In support of this, shoppers who are unaccompanied have been observed to spend slightly less money than those accompanied by another adult (Sommer et al., 1992), who spend less again than those accompanied by a child (Thomas and Garland, 1993). Time spent in store has been found to increase by 10% when children (defined in the prior research as under 18 years of age) accompany the shopper (Thomas and Garland, 1993). A limitation of this prior work is that Thomas and Garland (1993) restricted their sample to shoppers on a self-defined "major" grocery shopping trip, which is not representative of all shopping trips in general, which are weighted towards smaller trips for fewer items (Larson et al., 2005; Sorensen, 2009; Sorensen et al., 2017). Based on this prior research, we expect that shoppers accompanied by children will take longer to purchase items, on a per-item basis and spend more on their trips.

Shoppers move in recognizable patterns within grocery retail spaces (Sorensen et al., 2017). Patterns in shopping paths through the store such as the "race track" (Farley and Ring, 1966; Larson et al., 2005; Sorensen, 2009), preferences for the ends of aisles rather than the middle (Hui et al., 2009a), and the "u-turn" (Sorensen, 2009) have been documented across varying store formats and countries. Crowding is also seen to influence consumer behaviour: it has been found to decrease shopping and purchase intentions (Harrell et al., 1980), and while it draws people to a section, decreases their likelihood of stopping to shop there (Hui et al., 2009b). The "butt brush" effect may be a contributor to this, where if shoppers cannot browse without being bumped by other shoppers, sales will decline in those areas (Underhill, 1999). Sorensen's (2009) advice is therefore to have less "aisleness" – that is, to have wider aisles and less floor space devoted to shelving. This is because crowding is a stressor to humans (Epstein, 1981), which