The Relative Influence of Consumer Socialization Agents on Children and Adolescents – Examining the Past and Modeling the Future

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This paper uses an integrated model of ‘relative influence’ to review three decades of consumer socialization research with respect to the relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents. The review suggests that psychological developments and culture can be used as antecedents, to model and research ‘relative influence.’ Care should be taken however, to address conceptual and research issues of the past such as (1) lack of conclusive empirical evidence and (2) methodological concerns. Finally, the revised model suggested by the literature is presented.

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses an integrated model of ‘relative influence’ to review three decades of consumer socialization research with respect to the relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents. The review suggests that psychological developments and culture can be used as antecedents, to model and research ‘relative influence.’ Conceptual and research issues of the past such as (1) lack of conclusive empirical evidence and (2) methodological concerns are discussed later in the paper. Finally, recommendations for further research in the area are presented.

INTRODUCTION
Consumer behavior is almost always performed under the influence of others. Consumer socialization agents such as parents, peers and the mass media are external influences that initiate children and adolescents into their roles as consumers, by helping them acquire what Ward (1974) terms the skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the market place.

Parents, peers, mass media and cultural context together make up the social environment in which children learn to become consumers (John 1999). Research provides some evidence that interaction with one of these socialization agents affects the way children and adolescents interact with the others (Gunter and Furnham 1998). Hence, studying the relative influence of consumer socialization agents is likely to provide a richer understanding of the consumer socialization process. Moschis and Churchill (1978) suggest that a closer look at the relative influence of these agents firstly will help explain the processes through which young people develop the ability to evaluate commercial stimuli (e.g. cognitive development versus social learning), and secondly advance consumer socialization theory.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical review of past consumer socialization research with specific reference to the relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents. The literature review will be organized by presenting a ‘relative influence’ model. Finally, a conceptual and methodological critique of past research will be presented followed by the revised model.

THE RELATIVE INFLUENCE MODEL–A BROAD OVERVIEW
Figure 1 presents a schematic representation of the relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents. The model is not intended to be a comprehensive theoretical model of relative consumer socialization influence, but attempts to structure three decades of consumer socialization research. Consumer socialization agents (e.g. parents, peers and mass media) interact with children and adolescents through the consumer socialization process (Component 1), in two ways. Firstly, socialization occurs through the degree of influence that each socialization agent has (Component 2). Secondly, socialization occurs through the processes of influence used by each agent (Component 3). It is this variation in degrees and processes of influence that makes up the relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents (Component 4). This process of relative consumer socialization ultimately leads to outcomes such as children’s acquisition of consumer skills and knowledge (Component 5). The following sections provide a detailed description of each component of the model.

COMPONENT DESCRIPTION AND RELATED EVIDENCE
Component 1: Consumer Socialization Process
The process of consumer socialization occurs when children and adolescents interact with consumer socialization agents to acquire consumer skills, knowledge and attitudes. This paper examines the relative consumer socialization process with respect to the three key agents—parents, peers and mass media. With respect to mass media, this paper will focus on examining the consumer socializing influence of television/advertising, as the primary mass medium children are exposed to.

Component 2: Degree of Influence
Parents
Parents are the primary influence on children and the most important and effective means of inculcating consumer beliefs and habits (Gunter and Furnham 1998; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977). The importance of parental control over children’s consumerism is likely to diminish with increasing age, due to diminishing economic dependence of children on parents (Moschis 1987) and children’s increasing levels of psychosocial development. The level of psychosocial or emotional development in children decides that it is both unfair (i.e. takes advantage of the lower levels of development in younger children) and undesirable (i.e. helps in acquiring irrational motives for consumption and a strong desire for brands and products) (John 1999; Moschis 1978). Others argue that parents and peers are the main sources of learning of consumer skills (Goldstein 1998; Moschis and Moore 1979a).

Television/Advertising
Television is considered a major influence on the consumer socialization of children, as it is the primary medium through which children are exposed to product advertising (Ward et al. 1977). The relative degree of such influence (compared to parents and peers) is contentious one, however. Critics of advertising suggest that it has the primary socializing influence on youth—an influence so strong that it is both unfair (i.e. takes advantage of the lower levels of development in younger children) and undesirable (i.e. helps in acquiring irrational motives for consumption and a strong desire for brands and products) (John 1999; Moschis 1978). Others argue that parents and peers are the main sources of learning of consumer skills (Goldstein 1998; Moschis and Churchill 1978).

This can be further supported by the fact that youth fads (e.g. roller skates and men’s earrings) are perpetuated by word of mouth and imitation, rather than advertising. Advertising, in fact, often cashes in on what children and adolescents consider popular products and trends rather than creating such trends (Goldstein 1998). Research suggests however that the consumer socializing influence of television is strong enough for it to play a mediating role on the influence of other consumer socialization agents such as parents.
and peers (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis 1978), though they may also in turn mediate advertising’s influence (Moschis 1978). While in the case of both children and adolescents, television provides opportunities for increased consumption-oriented interaction with their parents (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis 1978); in the case of adolescents it may actually decrease such interaction with peers (Churchill and Moschis 1979).

Literature on television/advertising’s influence further suggests that the impact of television/advertising on children and adolescents seems limited by their developing cognitive abilities. It will have a differential impact on children in different stages of development (Uusitalo and Takala 1993; Ward et al. 1977) because, “as children mature, they make a transition from viewers who see advertising as purely informative, entertaining, and trustworthy to ones who view advertising in a more skeptical, analytical, and discerning fashion” (John 1999 p. 191).

Children are more perceptually bound in early childhood (Ward et al. 1977) and hence their learning from television commercials may be influenced primarily by perceptual characteristics. This implies that recall of advertising is poor among younger children and becomes complex, multi-dimensional and complete only as they grow older (Ward et al. 1977). Sanft (1986) found that children recall information that is peripheral to the product, and young children in particular, recall very little product relevant information.

Children towards the end of early childhood ‘play’ with the content of commercials rather than take them as providing serious product information. Those who are about to reach adolescence however have considerably developed cognitive skills and develop a slightly more critical attitude towards advertising, especially towards its “untruthful” rhetoric (Uusitalo and Takala 1993). Research has found that elementary school children cannot identify stores from their advertising slogans. Given young children’s frequent exposure to television, the only likely reason for this may be that the socializing influence of advertising does not extend to the kind of processing that would put brand names and advertising slogans in the long-term memory of young children (Reece 1984).

As in the case of children, cognitive development has a role to play in adolescents’ interactions with television. The increasingly complex content and structure of adolescents’ cognitive capabilities and mental models have been shown to precipitate “epistemic doubt” (as defined by Boyes and Chandler 1992), and hence adolescents may become extremely skeptical due to their own changing beliefs and the realization of the relativeness of truth (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994). This cognitive dynamism of adolescence extends to beliefs and attitudes about consumer behavior (Boush et al. 1994), as evidenced by the fact that older adolescents have greater consumer affairs knowledge, are better able to differentiate product attribute information in advertisements, and have less favorable attitudes toward advertising than do younger adolescents (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Moore 1979a). Cognitive development may predict the acquisition of cognitive defenses towards commercials in adolescents (Moschis 1978).

**Peer Group**

Peers, though under-researched as socialization agents (John 1999), are a significant source of influence upon children’s consumer behavior. Such influence seems to begin at about mid-childhood (McNeal 1964) and increases with age to reach a high at adolescence (Campbell 1969). The greater peer-dependency of adolescents implies that they will spend more time away from family and home. This affects adolescents’ frequency of interaction with parents and peers (Gunter and Furnham 1998), with increasing age being associated negatively with frequency of communication about consumption with parents and positively with peers (Moschis and Churchill 1978).

While the frequency of communication with peers and parents changes, it is not clear whether the actual influence of these agents undergoes corresponding changes. Some studies have shown that parents are still the main influence affecting buying decisions in specific situations (Moschis and Moore 1979a). Adolescents’ frequency of interaction with peers about consumption matters adequately predicts their involvement in the early stages of household consumer decision making; but such influence declines as the household moves towards actual product purchase, suggesting parental mediation of the effects of peer influence (Moschis and Mitchell 1986). Such parental mediation in fact, seems to occur across cultural boundaries, as reported by Singaporean research (Mehta and Keng 1985).

Research suggests that psychological development (e.g., psychosocial development and the ability for social perspective taking) plays a strong role in determining the relative degree of peer group
influence (Bachmann et al. 1993). There will be differences in the extent to which children are capable of receiving and acting upon peer group influence depending upon their stage of development. Children under 5 years of age would seem to be the least susceptible to referent group influence, as they have greater difficulty in acknowledging and taking another person’s perspective. Children in the later part of early childhood and beginning of middle childhood are somewhat likely to be influenced by their peers. They may either dismiss peer influence altogether, or may simply believe that their friends’ opinions are somewhat important, no matter the type of product.

Children in the upper end of middle childhood appear more susceptible to reference group influence than their younger counterparts since they can anticipate other’s reactions to their opinions and behavior, and can consider their own preferences in conjunction with others’ opinions. But it is children twelve years of age and older who show the strongest susceptibility and most sophisticated sensitivity to reference group influence as they realize that psychological impressions can be formed on the basis of consumption preferences and choices (Bachmann et al. 1993).

Component 3: Processes of Influence

Parents

Parents do not consciously train younger children in the area of consumer behavior (Ward et al. 1977) but may purposely attempt to teach consumer skills to adolescents (Moschis 1978). Younger children learn such skills more through a relatively “direct” teaching process, while children approaching adolescence learn more indirectly through observation (Ward et al. 1977).

Consumer socialization processes adopted by parents are likely to have differential impact on children depending on their ages, and stages of cognitive development (Ward et al. 1977). Firstly, the role of parent-child interaction in supporting the child’s performance of various consumer skill increases with age, such that for older children interaction is equally likely to facilitate or hinder the performance of these skills. (Ward et al. 1977) study indicated that mother-child interaction variables provide positive support for the kindergartner’s performance of consumer skills, but for third and sixth-graders the pattern of relationships was mixed. Frequent interaction with the mother about consumption is likely to teach younger children various consumer skills, which they can then perform on their own. Such gross kinds of interaction have little utility for older children, who begin to be impacted by more subtle aspects of parent-child interaction, such as family communication (see Moschis and colleagues in the 1980’s).

Secondly, there seems to be a decrease in the positive impact of mothers’ socialization goals on consumer skill performance of children, as they grow older. This may be attributed to the decreasing impact of parent-child interaction on children with age, as interaction is the primary way through which these goals are communicated to the child (Ward et al. 1977). Thirdly, as the child increases in age, the mother’s own consumer behavior plays an increasing role in supporting the child’s performance of various consumer skills. (Ward et al. 1977) found the mother’s own behaviors had a mixed impact on the kindergarteners’ performance of consumer skills, but clearly supported the third-graders and sixth-graders’ skill performance. The subtle and abstract consumer information-processing skills reflected in the mother’s own consumer behavior may not be understood by a younger child, but the older children not only understand her behavior but also integrate it with their own (Ward et al. 1977).

Finally, research provides evidence of a decrease of the positive impact of providing children with consumption opportunities, with increasing age. Providing a child with such opportunities facilitates consumer learning only when some level of supervision is maintained. The relatively less supervised consumer behavior of older children may make skill learning a matter of trial and error for them, with an almost equal likelihood of both failure and success (Ward et al. 1977).

Research suggests that parental socialization processes are also likely to have variable impact in different cultures (Rose 1999). Japanese mothers have been found to restrict their children’s consumption, allow less consumption autonomy and report high levels of child’s influence. American mothers on the other hand, have high levels of communication about consumption and allow their children more consumption autonomy than do Japanese mothers.

Television/Advertising

Children and adolescents appear to be influenced by vastly different socialization processes when it comes to consumer learning from television/advertising. Children are primarily affected by mere exposure to the medium, implying that increased levels of exposure will lead to increased skill levels. Adolescents are more affected by the use they make of television/advertising, much of which has been found to be social in nature (Moschis 1978).

Social processes such as communication with peers may condition adolescents’ perceptions and interest in goods and services, which in turn lead to their paying more attention to television programs and commercials to learn about the social uses of products (Bandura 1971; Moschis 1978). This implies a transactional model of communication effects (as proposed by McLeod and Becker 1974).

Peer Group

Peer group influence on consumer socialization is an under-researched topic and past research has primarily been conducted on adolescents (see Moschis and colleagues 1970’s and 1980’s). Hence, not much is known about the processes through which the peer group exerts influence, except for the fact that frequency/extent of adolescent communication with peer groups leads to the acquisition of consumer learning and mediates interaction with other agents.

Component 4: Relative Influence of Consumer Socialization Agents

Based on the number of studies examining the impact of parents and television and advertising compared to the few studies addressing peer group influence, it seems that consumer socialization literature attributes a higher degree of influence to some socialization agents versus others. (Ward et al. 1977) state that the family and mass media influences have been accorded this relatively important status based on findings of socialization research in other contexts such as political socialization. Consumer socialization literature suggests that the key socialization agents such as parents, peers and mass media are likely to use different processes to socialize children versus adolescents (Ward et al. 1977).

The literature indicates that the likely antecedents of such ‘relative influence’ are psychological developments and culture. Cognitive and social developments have been strongly linked to the relative influence of individual consumer socialization agents (Bachmann et al. 1993) and individual socialization processes (Ward et al. 1977). Similarly, culture has been linked to the influence of one consumer socialization agent versus another (McNeal and Ji 1998; Mehta and Keng 1985), as well as the relative use of socialization processes (Rose 1999).

Component 5: Outcomes of Socialization

Consumer learning firstly includes the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes directly relevant to consumption behavior
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and the transaction itself, and secondly, those that are indirectly relevant which motivate purchase or consumption (Ward 1974).

The literature suggests that children are imparted the first type of learning by socialization agents, whereas adolescents learn the second level of skills, thus implying that even socialization outcomes can be relative, as children increase in age.

Parents

Adolescents learn different consumer skills than children due to parents’ purposive attempts to teach consumer skills to their teenagers (Moschis 1978). Parental consumer socialization of younger children seems to focus on direct consumer learning (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Ward et al. 1977), while in the case of adolescents (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis 1978), parents also influence indirect consumer learning, such as the learning of rational or economic motivations for consumption (Riesman and Roseborough 1955).

Television/Advertising

Television advertising acts as a source of new product information, providing children with some knowledge of the range of goods and services available, and the attributes and criteria that they can employ in evaluating various purchase alternatives. Research suggests that this may vary between American and non-American cultures. Retail stores are the primary source of new product information for American children (Ward et al. 1977) whereas television advertising is primary in the case of Chinese children (McNeal and Ji 1998).

Viewership of advertising may directly affect product choice by influencing the child to buy or request a particular product (Robertson and Rossiter 1977; Wartella, Wackman, and Ward 1978), or by influencing the child’s strategy for taking product decisions (i.e. suggesting certain brand attributes) (Wartella et al. 1978). Research suggests that children who watch a lot of television commercials have more favorable attitudes towards commercials (Atkin 1975; Rossiter and Robertson 1976), are more inclined to believe the advertising messages (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2000), and ask for advertised products more frequently than children who view little or no commercials (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2000; Gorn and Goldberg 1980; Robertson et al. 1989). The socializing influence of television may also play a mediating role on the influence of other agents, as it provides opportunities for consumption-oriented interaction between parents and children (Moschis 1978).

The influence of television/广告 on adolescents extends into complex learning, both directly, through the frequency of viewing (Moschis 1978) and indirectly, by setting up the agenda for positive parent-child interaction (Riesman and Roseborough 1955). Television/advertising impacts upon adolescents in three ways, through: (1) imparting favorable attitudes towards advertising and brands, (2) direct acquisition of “expressive” elements of consumption (i.e. social motives for consumption and materialistic attitudes) and (3) indirect influence on ‘goal directed’ elements of consumption (i.e. economic or rational motivations for consumption) (Moschis 1978).

Peer Group

Even at 5-10 years of age, children’s consumer related attitudes and values could be shaped by peer group influence (Gunter and Furnham 1998), through comments peers make about products or brands, and about the way they are advertised; which may modify the effectiveness of advertisements (Greenberg 1986).

In adolescence, peer group influence extends beyond acquisition of simple consumer skills to more complex and indirect consumer learning (Gunter and Furnham 1998; Moschis and Churchill 1978). Peers influence adolescents’ preferences for products and brands, both directly, and indirectly through taking consideration of their peer’s product preferences during product evaluation (Gunter and Furnham 1998). Interpersonal communication with peers influences other positive aspects of consumer behavior via provision of consumer affairs knowledge, increasing cognitive defenses against advertising, and building the desire to explore more sources of information (Moschis 1978). Peers also influence more complex notions such as adolescents’ acquisition of the expressive elements of consumption as well as their materialistic attitudes (Moschis 1978).

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Ward, Klees, and Wackman (1990) suggest that certain areas of research in consumer socialization still have ‘high marginal utility’ for additional research. (John 1999) reiterates that significant gaps still remain in the understanding of consumer socialization. The relative influence of consumer socialization agents on children and adolescents seems to be an area where significant conceptual and research gaps exist.

Much controversy surrounds the relative influence of socialization agents on children and adolescents’ learning of individual consumer skills (Moschis and Churchill 1978). The findings of research in the context of political socialization have accorded more importance to family and mass media (Ward et al. 1977) relative to other socializing agents. While critics of advertising suggest it is primarily advertising that influences youth, that too undesirably; others argue that parents and peers are the main sources of learning of consumer skills (Goldstein 1998). Finally, most child psychologists report the overriding, and possibly negative, influence of peer groups in certain age groups such as adolescence.

There is a dearth of empirical research on the topic of ‘relative influence’, with respect to the number of studies as well as issues examined. Most studies deal only with the impact of one socialization agent (Bachmann et al. 1993; Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Moschis and Moore 1979b). Even then, there is little emphasis on studying the relative impact of the socialization agent between children of different ages. Further, studies that deal with more than one socialization agent, have primarily been conducted among adolescents (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Mitchell 1986) and only a single study provides some explanation of the ‘relative influence’ issue in case of young children (Ward et al. 1977).

Past research on the relative influence of consumer socialization agents also suffers from methodological issues. (Ward et al. 1977) who examined the influence of parents and television on children, collected data from children on their performance of consumer skills and linked this with data collected from mothers on consumer socialization processes used, thus not directly testing the issue. Moschis and Churchill (1978) tried measuring relative influence of consumer socialization agents on adolescents using multiple regression analysis, but suggest cautious interpretation of their results, due to possible inter-correlations between predicting variables.

CONCLUSION

Key consumer socialization agents have a relative impact upon children and adolescents that manifests itself through: (1) degree of influence, (2) processes used and (3) outcomes of socialization. This relative impact is not only between one socialization agent and another, but also between childhood and adolescence, and may be a function of internal psychological developments, such as cognitive and social (Bachmann et al. 1993; Ward et al. 1977). This is supported by the literature. John (1999) suggests that such
developments provide a backdrop for the growing sophistication children exhibit in understanding and performing in the consumer role (e.g., the ability to focus beyond perceptual characteristics, to think abstractly, to develop a deeper understanding of interpersonal situation, etc).

Further, culture also seems to determine the relative role of individual consumer socialization agents (McNeal and Ji 1998; Mehta and Keng 1985) and processes (Rose 1999) versus one another. This seems justified as culture is one of the variables that make up the social environment in which children learn to become consumers and understanding the differences between cultures may provide an opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the socialising influence of factors such as family structure or peer relationships (John 1999).

The review of the literature thus indicates that there is scope to build a theoretical model of ‘relative influence’ and conduct further research, as long as one takes care of the issues with past research. A schematic representation of the revised relative influence model is given in Figure 2, incorporating the antecedents suggested by the literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Firstly, future research on the ‘relative influence’ of consumer socialization agents should incorporate the use of a multi-theoretical perspective of psychological development, as no single socialization theory can accurately describe the complex picture of consumer behavior development and change (Moschis and Smith 1985). The impact of culture on the ‘relative influence’ of consumer socialization agents can be examined in two ways; through direct statistical measurement of cultural dimensions, or indirectly, by conducting cross-cultural research.

Research on the ‘relative influence’ of consumer socialization agents could also combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies to enrich the interpretative qualities of the data and to permit increased confidence in findings that are consistent across methods (Mangleburg 1990, in the context of research on children’s purchase influence). Finally, future research can consider directly measuring the impact of socialization agents and processes, across respondent age groups, even young children, as children themselves are competent, though different, providers of research data (Todd 2001).

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