

Child Influence in Female Headed Single-Parent Households: Agenda for Consumer Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most marketing scholars concur that children exercise considerable influence in family consumption activities. Parents perceive influence of children in all stages of the decision making process. Research indicates that single mothers often have to multi-task and consequently allot less time to their children. As an added perspective, a single mother may rely on a greater division of household duties with her child. This arrangement could result in the child having an adult equivalent role not perceived in dual-parent households. This study hopes to uncover theoretical insights that might be used to study implications of the child's influence in decision making processes in female headed single-parent households. Preliminary interviews with single mothers yield remarkable research questions that are further investigated using data driven, constant comparative methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Census Bureau defines a female-headed single-parent household as a household where the mother is not living with a married partner and is the principle care-giver in the family. In 2006, 23 percent of the 73.7 Million of total children population under 18 years of age lived in female headed single-parent households. There is however, a need to look beyond demographics and instead focus on "life stages" as it is estimated that half the child population in this country will be part of a non-traditional household during the course of growing up. The role of these children may not be the same as that in traditional dual-parent households. Studies in sociology, psychology, and public policy have found differences in maturity levels in children given family structure and other socio-demographic circumstances. For instance, Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton (1997) found that adolescents from non-traditional households exhibited more materialism and greater levels of compulsive consumption behavior than those from traditional dual-parent households.

Many studies indicate the importance of understanding the dynamics between adult(s) and children in single-parent households as there are numerous factors affecting decision making in families today. For instance late marriages result in older parents and fewer children. Cohabitation and re-marriage result in step-families where the child has to contend with step-parent and step-siblings, the latter often with wide age gaps (Mulkey, Crain and Harrington, 1992; Bumpass and Raley, 1995; Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Other research showed that working women who delayed motherhood for career growth allowed a greater degree of influence as they had more money to spend on their children (McNeal, 1992). Ward and Wackman (1972) found that mothers were more likely to be swayed by children in food purchases. Caruana (2003) surveyed both parent and child in order to understand family communication patterns and found that children of single-parent families often shopped independently and had more in-depth consumption related communication with parents. Similarly, other studies found parent's perception of adolescent's influence greater in single-parent than dual-parent households when it came to consumption choices (Mangelburg, Grewald and Bristol, 1999). They also report that children perceive lesser authority enforcement in single-parent households than families with both parents present. Kurdek and Fine (1993) surveyed adolescents and reported that children living with a divorced parent perceived a more laissez-faire parenting style than those living in intact families. These multidisciplinary findings offer insights that are distinctive when placed in the consumption context.

An extensive search of marketing literature revealed little extant research on the participation of children in single-parent household consumption decision making process. Some research was found on the parents' perceptions of the influence of children in traditional dual-parent families (Palan and Wilkes, 1997). To date, there have only been a handful of studies in marketing, reflecting the relationship between household characteristics and decision making process in the single-parent household domain (Ahuja and Stinson, 1993; Ahuja and Walker, 1994; Palan and Wilkes, 1997). It is evident from these findings that child influence in single-parent households may be distinctly different from traditional dual parent households in many respects.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The classic four stages of decision making process namely problem recognition, information search, final choice and actual purchase are considered. These four stages have been previously utilized in the area of marketing and consumer research (Davis, 1976; Ferber, 1975). Although research is divided on the number of stages in family purchasing decisions, the four stage process is an established concept in marketing (Swinyard and Sim, 1987). There are numerous factors affecting decision making in families today. Single parents often have to multi-task and allocate more responsibilities to the child. Cultural values are important factors in today's families with racial and ethnic diversities, shaping and influencing children's consumer socialization (Bumpass, Raley and Sweet, 1995). The author conducted preliminary discussions with single mothers to identify areas of inquiry and further refine the research domain. This initial process yielded several important research questions some of which are outlined below with excerpts from the conversations:

Vested Interest in Purchase

“My son sometimes underestimates my ability to get information about a fancy hi-tech toy that he is been after. He tries to explain sometimes, you know, exaggerating, I mean, a lot!! He thinks he can hoodwink me because I am you know clueless about these things and he has only me to convince.”

Researchers have found that children tend to assert greater influence in product categories that are most relevant to them (Beatty and Talpade, 1994). Research findings also suggest that parents perceive children to have greater influence in product categories of related products than other household product categories (Ahuja and Walker, 1994). Another fascinating area of research that relates to child's vested interest in purchase is the concept of reactance first introduced by Brehm in 1966. Reactance theory alludes to the emotional state of motivation that arises from threats to individual freedom. Reactance in the realm of child consumer research refers to the tendency of a child to opt for the opposite direction from that of parents' influence of their consumption behavior. Christenson (1992) found that children were disposed towards purchasing risqué music only when parental advice was stronger than usual. These studies open up a new area of examining reactance theory in the single-parent context.

Research Questions:

- What are the perceptions of single mothers regarding her child's influence in consumption decision making processes?
- What role does reactance play in a single-parent family?
- Do age and gender of the child affect reactance? How?
- Do children in single-parent families exhibit stronger reactance due to the presence of one authority figure when compared to dual authority figures in traditional households? How?

Interest/Expertise/Knowledge Related to Purchase

“When he was around 10 I think, he was very happy to go to the store with me. I think he was proud to find good deals say 50 cents off dishwashing soap. Now (at 13) he is more interested in pricey stuff. Not so much regular stuff you know. But when I think he is not paying attention (listening to music with ear phones), he grabs something with a (marked down) sticker. He knows what I usually get and (laughs) what our budget is like.”

A remarkable finding brought forward by Neeley (2005) is the observation that girls and boys are influenced by their parents at different levels in the consumer socialization process. Researchers like Moschis and Churchill (1978) and Moschis (1985) found that parents especially mothers co-shopped and influenced consumption learning of girls more than boys. The above conversation with a single mother indicates a different perspective as her son is considered by her to be quite knowledgeable about household purchases. Others found that parents in higher socio-economic groups engaged in deliberate consumer training more than parents in lower socio-economic groups (Ward and Wackman, 1972). According to research findings relating to authoritative power based on resource theory, parents are more powerful than children in the social unit of a family as they control the purchasing power in the buying process (Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekstrom, 1989). However this approach does not take into account the power of information in terms of influence. Of particular interest in the context of socio-demographic

status of the single-parent is the stage of decision making process given age of child and complexity of product category.

Research Questions

- How are everyday consumption decisions made between parent and child?
- How does the child exhibit knowledge/expertise in the decision making process?
- In what circumstances does the mother acknowledge the child to be an expert?

Relevance of the Role of Gender Orientation

“He thinks he is the man of the house and tries to get his way because his uncles, family you know, they say these kinds of things. When he is at his dad’s he is more reserved because of his step mother. I mean we are on good terms but still all his tantrums and antics are at home. Sometime I give in if I am too tired but mostly I try that he doesn’t get his way like that.”

Gender role orientation has been defined as the extent to which children as well as adults display gender stereotypic behavior or state a preference for a particular type of gender role (Tinson and Nancarrow, 2005). Extensive research on gender roles has been conducted on couples (Godwin and Scanzoni 1989; Kaufman 2000; Belch and Willis 2002). However, studies that extended the concept in dual-parent households involving children have revealed mixed results by marketing scholars (Grusky, Bonacich and Webster, 1995; Kaufman, 2000). Some researchers found that gender role play is not influential in family buying decisions whereas others concluded that the issue of changing gender roles cannot be ignored as is witnessed by the growing number of women working in the labor force who are heads of households (Kaufman, 2000; Tinson and Nancarrow, 2005). Sociologists found that adolescent girls although actively participating in socially stereotyped “girlie” activities such as shopping for ‘tea-party’ clothes in ‘Girl Heaven’ stores appeared resentful of conforming to such formulaic expectations (Russell and Tyler, 2002). It is evident from these findings that researchers need to look beyond stereotypes and identify the function of gender role in today’s complex family structures.

Research Questions:

- What role does gender stereotypes play between a single mother and her son when compared to a mother and daughter?
- Does gender role orientation influence consumption decisions? How?

METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is exploratory in nature. Quantitative methods which are useful for measuring phenomena are inappropriate for this study as there is little theoretical knowledge available. Qualitative methods which are useful for uncovering meanings, definitions and nature of things are apt here as the researcher can go forward without any predetermined notions (Charmaz, 2000). The use of qualitative methods allows the researcher to inquire without being influenced by fixed taxonomy of analysis (Patton, 1990). The principal research method to gather data is open-ended, in-depth interviews of single mothers who are household heads. Research in marketing and the social sciences have produced evidence suggesting that age of a child is a critical component in terms of participation levels in family decision making. The reason for this is the assumption that children less than nine years are too young to fully

comprehend the complexities of decision making. On the other hand, children over seventeen consider themselves capable of making their own decision as they are on the verge of adulthood (Beatty and Talpade, 1994). Therefore the age group of nine-seventeen years is ideal for the purposes of this study.

CONCLUSION

Researchers in social sciences have identified various ways in which children display different behavior patterns depending on the type of household they come from. Materialism and compulsive consumption behavior in children have been found to be more in single-parent households than in dual-parent households. Parental authority and its impact on children's consumption patterns also reflect a disparity in single-parent families. Since this is a data driven study, the author intends to investigate further by conducting more interviews with single mothers. The data will be analyzed and findings presented using the constant comparative method recommended by Wolcott (1994).

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