Children’s perception of their influence over purchases: the role of parental communication patterns

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**Abstract:** Socialisation by children is seen as taking place within a socio-cultural environment where family patterns of communication play a pivotal role. The socio- and concept-orientation are two predominant parental communication styles that are likely to affect the perceived influence that children believe they hold. This study focuses on the perceived influence of children resulting from the communication pattern adopted by parents. Research is conducted among a dyad consisting of parent and child that visit a recreational site. Results are reported, conclusions are drawn and recommendations for future research are made.

**Introduction**

Since the early 1990s children have progressively become the focus of marketers as it became evident that, besides being customers in their own right, children’s influence on family purchasing was steadily increasing. Reports in marketing literature advised retailers to target children as a key marketing influence with child-friendly amenities, colourful and playful displays and even credit cards for children. Studies commissioned by cable television networks in the USA, found that an average of 43 per cent of total purchases made by parents were influenced by children (Cooper, 1999). The ability of children to influence parents’ buying behaviour has encouraged promotions across diverse industries. For example, in the USA, Shell Oil promoted petrol stations through the launching of a Walt Disney film production in conjunction with the film producers 20th Century Fox (Stanley, 1997).

Liebeck (1994) reports that “mothers who shop with their kids wind up spending 30 per cent more then they originally intended and fathers spend 70 per cent more”. US studies have shown that in the main categories of food and beverages, playthings and apparel and TV programmes, children have a critical influence (Belch et al., 1985; Foxman et al., 1989; Swinyard and Sim, 1987; Ward and Wackman, 1972). According to McNeal (1992), American children spent over $132 billion on 62 product categories and, on average, 17 percent of family spending in selected categories of products were influenced by children. In the UK, a study by the Henley Centre in 1993, titled: “Planning for social change”, found that children influenced household purchases that were not for their own use. According to the survey, 84 per cent of parents said that children decided what food to buy; 29 per cent said that their children had a say in choice of furniture; while, surprisingly, 20 per cent of parents admitted to being influenced by their children in their own choice of clothing (Lang, 1993).

Children acquire skills and attitudes towards the marketplace in a process of consumer socialisation. Of all environmental socialisation agents, parental influence is the most pervasive and important. The response of parents to children’s attempts at influencing family purchases, acts as reinforcements to children’s future behaviour as consumers. Parents who satisfy children’s requests
encourage children to be attentive to advertising and to ask for things more frequently; while parents who discuss children’s requests, encourage them to develop skills in selecting and interpreting product information (Ward et al., 1986). Since parents are considered to be the most important socialisation agents, understanding the nature of parent-child communication can help provide an explanation for differences in child behaviour and skills. Moreover, the method of communication between parent and child has a more significant impact on consumer socialisation than frequency or amount of interaction between parent and child (Carlson et al., 1990a; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1984; Moschis et al., 1986).

This research takes a social and cultural approach whereby learning by children is seen as taking place within such an environment. This learning or socialisation is critical for children in acquiring the skills that make them efficient operators in the market. Family patterns of communication play a pivotal role in this socialisation. The socio- and concept-orientation are two predominant parental communication styles that are likely to affect the perceived influence that children believe they hold. This study focuses on the perceived influence of children resulting from the communication pattern adopted by parents. Research is conducted among a dyad consisting of parent and child that visit a recreational site. Results are reported, conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made.

Family communication patterns in children consumer socialisation

Family communication patterns have been successfully used in predicting consumer socialisation whereby a child’s consumer behaviour is conditioned by the style of parent-child communication (Moschis and Moore, 1979). Family communication patterns are instrumental in the amount of influence that children exercise on family decisions in the present, and the way children will behave as consumers in the future. The socio- and conceptorientations are two patterns of family communication between parent and child. The socio-oriented communication dimension is intended to produce obedience from the child and to foster harmonious and pleasant social relationships at home. This form of communication is based on monitoring and controlling the behaviour of children and is motivated by social conformity. Children are encouraged to make consumer decisions that lead to the liking and acceptance of others. They are taught to avoid controversy and to repress their feelings for the sake of not arguing with adults or risk offending others. In contrast, the concept-oriented parental communication dimension encourages children to develop their own views about the world. Concept-oriented parents are more focused on the functional aspect and deal with events by evaluating alternatives on their own merits. These parents encourage the child to weigh all alternatives before making a decision and may expose children to controversy by discussing issues openly (Carlson et al., 1990b; Hall et al., 1995; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1986).

Parents with a socio-oriented communication style are characterised by monitoring and controlling children’s consumer learning and behaviour and seek to promote obedience. They do not discuss consumption activities and expect children to comply with previously established limitations. Parents with a concept-oriented communication style support children in developing their own skills and competences and encourage them to make decisions about purchases irrespective of the opinions of others. They consult their children and value their opinions in purchase decisions even for products that are not for their consumption (Carlson et al., 1990a; Carlson et al., 1990b; Ekstrom et al., 1987; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1984; Moschis et al., 1986; Rose et al., 1998).
Children in concept-oriented families are expected to exert more influence on family purchase decisions. In view of this and the above it is expected that:

**H1a.** There is a positive relationship between a child’s perceived influence on consumption choice decisions and the level of concept-orientation held by the parent.

**H1b.** There is a no relationship between a child’s perceived influence on consumption choice decisions and the level of socio-orientation held by the parent.

### Fourfold typology of family communication patterns and perceived influence of children

The concept- and socio-orientation are two opposite polar dimensions that, when combined in a matrix, lead to a fourfold typology of family communication patterns that have been labelled: Laissez-faire, Protective, Pluralistic and Consensual (Rose et al., 1998) ± Figure 1. Laissez-faire parents emphasise neither of the two communication dimensions and there is little communication between parents and children. “Protective” parents emphasises the socio-orientation dimension stressing obedience and social harmony and are not concerned with conceptual matters. On the other hand, “Pluralistic” families stress the concept-orientation dimension with emphasis on respect for one’s interests and those of others where children are encouraged to discuss ideas openly without fear of punishment. Finally, “Consensual” parents emphasise both the socio- and concept-orientation dimensions. In these families, children are encouraged to explore the world around them and to form their own opinions (Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1986; Rose et al., 1998).

The fourfold framework is useful in market research of family buying behaviour. It has been related to attitudes towards advertising and the media (Chaffee et al., 1970; Moschis and Mitchell (1986); Moschis and Moore, 1979; Rose et al., 1998) and differences in socialisation behaviour (Carlson and Grossbart, 1998). The perception by children of their influence is expected to be conditioned by the family fourfold framework of parental communication. It is expected that children with parents that have higher levels of concept orientation (“Pluralistic” and “Consensual”) will report higher perceived influences on purchase in general. However, children that come from “Pluralistic” families that encourage children to express opinions and explore ideas are expected to report even higher levels of perceived influence on purchase. Since children in “Protective” families are afforded limited exposure to the outside world and there is a strong emphasise on obedience and vertical relationships, it is expected that these children will exhibit the least perceived influence on purchase. Hence:

**H2.** Children of “Pluralistic family communication patterns will exhibit the highest level of perceived influence on purchases. These will be followed by those from “Consensual’, “Laissez-faire’ and “Protective” families, respectively.

Figure 1. Family communication patterns

### Methodology

Family decision-making studies that focus on family roles require the collection of data from both the parent and the child (Darley and Lim, 1986; Ekstrom et al., 1987; Kim and Lee, 1997; Szybillo and Sosanie, 1977). Consequently, the field research in this study was based on two questionnaires
directed at the parent-child dyad, consisting of a young child and a parent. One of the main problems in such multiple respondent studies is the frequent disagreement in the perceptions of family members (Kim and Lee, 1997). As a result, it was decided that private face-to-face interviews would be undertaken to collect the most accurate data regarding the child’s perceived purchase influence. The questionnaires were administered to one dyad every eight that frequented a leading indoor play area in Malta. This type of recreational activity is one that is appropriate for the collection of data to address issues in this study. By administering the questionnaire privately on site, it was possible to assist the younger child respondents and ensure that responses were spontaneous and without parental intervention.

In building the questionnaire for measuring the perceived influence of children, the procedure suggested by Churchill (1979) was followed. The point of departure was the ten depth interview questions for assessing children influence that appear in Palan and Wilkes (1997, p. 168). Eight individual depth interviews with children attending the indoor play area and a total of 11 questions were developed. An initial sample was collected from children attending the indoor play area. In developing the final instrument, four items were eliminated due to difficulty in obtaining child responses and to achieve adequate reliability in terms of coefficient alpha. The resultant seven items were thought sufficiently acceptable for further use and data capture. The children respondents being targeted varied between three and ten years of age. According to child development theories, children in this age group are in the “pre-operational” and “concrete operational” stages (Piaget, 1966) or the “perceptual” and “analytical” stage (Roedder, 1999). Both theories indicate that children under the age of seven have limited cognitive abilities. For this reason, the questionnaire for the child was designed with very simple terminology. Also, although it was initially designed with a Likert scale, initial testing showed that a three-point graphic scale:

(1) always;
(2) sometimes; or
(3) never

was more appropriate, as children seemed to be incapable of discerning their feelings in much detail. Where necessary, young children were assisted in answering through standard explanations. In order to reduce bias, only one person administered questionnaires to the youngest children.

The questionnaire administered to parents consisted of 14 questions and measured the socio- and concept-dimension of family communication. Socio-orientation focuses on the degree to which parents expect their children to defer to parental standards, while concept-orientation considers the extent to which parents encourage their children to develop their own consumption patterns. The instrument used to measure both the socio- and concept-orientation was that used by Rose et al. (1998). In the case of the socio-orientation scale, the five items used by these authors were kept while the eight-item measure for concept-orientation had the first question amended to ask about family recreational outings while a further question that probed this aspect was added. A Likert-
scale ranging from “very seldom” to “very often” was used. Previous research (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Carlson et al., 1992; Churchill and Moschis, 1979) indicated acceptable reliability in terms of coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) for these scales.

The final questionnaire used consisted of a total of 21 items (seven items for the children questionnaire and 14 in that for adults) and appears in Appendix 1. Besides these items, demographic data relating to the age and gender of child respondents and the age, gender, number of children in the family unit, the birth order of the child and whether the respondent worked or not were collected from the parent. A total of 100 pairs of questionnaires were collected over a period of four weeks.

Results

The ages of the children ranged between three to ten years with a mean of 5.86 and a standard deviation of 2.10. Adult respondents were aged between 20 and 49 years with a mean of 33.47 and a standard deviation of 5.67. Of adult respondents, 83 per cent were female while 54 per cent of children were girls. Of child respondents, 72 per cent were the first-born and 25 per cent were the second-born. The average number of children in the family was 1.74, with a standard deviation of 0.70. In terms of employment all male respondents reported full-time jobs as against only 18 per cent of females, while a further 19 per cent had part-time jobs. This reflects the situation in Malta, where only 28 per cent of all women are in full-time gainful employment.

The mean and standard deviation for each item in the child and parent questionnaire were computed and appear in Appendix I. To test the reliability of the instruments used, the coefficient alpha values for the perceived influence of children, the concept- and socio-orientation instruments were computed. At 0.71, 0.75 and 0.71, respectively, the latter values are in line with those reported in previous research (Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1984; Rose et al., 1998). These values exceed the 0.70 threshold and are therefore acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). The instruments used were also tested for convergent and discriminant validity. Principal component factor analysis followed by a Varimax rotation confirmed that the perceived child influence items loaded together as a single factor while the items for the socio- and concept-orientation loaded on two separate and distinct factors ± Appendix 1. These findings provide support for convergent and discriminant validity of the instruments in the study.
Cross-tabulations were conducted to investigate the inter-correlations among the metric independent variables that consisted of the demographic variables (age of child, age of parent and the number of children in the family), the sum of the concept- and socio-orientation scores of parents and the scores for children’s perception of their influence ± Table I. Results show a significant positive correlations of concept-orientation with children’s perceived influence; age of respondent child with both concept- and socio-orientation, and; age of parent with age of respondent child. Relationship of the non-metric measures for child birth order and gender of child with the metric variables were assessed via Eta tests but no significant relationships resulted.

In order to test the first hypothesis of the study, a multiple regression equation was undertaken. The criterion variable consisted of the sum of the items for perceived influence of children while the independent variables consisted of the sum of the cores for the concept- and socio-orientation. The correlation test in Table I show that the concept- and socio-orientation variables are not correlated. The regression provides a statistically significant R² of 7.0 per cent (F = 3.674; p < 0.05). Examination of the coefficients table shows that only the independent variable for the concept-orientation construct is statistically significant (std û = 0.27, p < 0.01). These results provide support for both H1a and H1b. Perception of influence by children are related to a concept-orientation of parents but not to a socio-orientation.

Concept- and socio-orientations represent two parental styles that are the polar ends of the family communication structure. In line with the practice of earlier researchers (Carslon et al., 1990a; Carlson et al., 1990b; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis et al., 1986; and Rose et al., 1998) the data were categorised into the fourfold typology of family communication patterns by splitting each of the two scales at median (Carlson et al., 1990b; Churchill and Moschis, 1979). The resultant categorisation indicated a split that consisted of Laissez faire 27 per cent, Protective 20 per cent, Pluralistic 26 per cent and Consensual 27 per cent. Following the computation of means, H2 was tested via the simple factorial ANOVA procedure rather than simple ANOVA, since the four family communication patterns resulted from two rather than just one variable. Table II provides support for the rejection of the null hypothesis that all four communication patterns result in the same perception of influence on purchase decisions among children. The differences in means for the four family communication patterns are in the expected order and the ANOVA test of differences confirms these to be statistically significant.
Conclusion and implications

Parental styles of family communication provide a means of understanding consumers. The main purpose of the field research has been to investigate whether parental communication style affects children’s perceived influence on purchases. Results show that children of concept-oriented parents have an influence on purchase decisions, while those with socio-orientation parents do not. Since concept-oriented parents encourage children to develop their own skills and competence as consumers it is likely to result in higher yielding to demands by children. Although focusing on the USA, McNeal (1992) provides four main reasons for an increase in children’s influence on family purchases that can be said to be held fairly broadly. First, parents have fewer children, thereby increasing the influence of each child. Second, there has been a general increase in one-parent families that has resulted in children doing their own shopping. Third, there has been an increase in working women and delayed childbearing, as a result of which mothers tend to have more money to spend on their children. Finally, out of necessity, working couples encourage more household participation and selfreliance. Comparative research in Malta and the USA showed that children in Malta exert greater influence on purchase decisions that those in the USA. This influence in large part appears to result from the possession of greater social power by Maltese children (Williams et al., 1999).

Rather than look at the socio- and concept-dimensions separately it is possible to consider both together. An interesting result of the research is the relationship between the resulting four-fold typology as defined by family communication pattern theory and the perception of influence of children. The findings show that in Malta, parents fall within the four-fold classification of family communication patterns with relatively equal frequencies ± Laissez faire 27 per cent, Protective 20 per cent, Pluralistic 26 per cent and Consensual 27 per cent. This is more akin to the situation in the USA ± Laissez-faire 22.1 per cent, Protective 23.4 per cent, Pluralistic 27.3 per cent and Consensual 27.2 per cent. In Japan, parents in the Pluralistic and Consensual typology tend to be significantly lower ± Laissez faire 35.4 per cent, Protective 40.9 per cent, Pluralistic 5.9 per cent and Consensual
17.7 per cent (Rose et al., 1998, Figure 2). The findings confirm that the perception of influence by children is higher among parents with a concept-orientation while of the four typologies the highest effect is that from “Pluralistic” parents which exhibit a high concept- and low socio-orientation. Children of “Protective” families report the lowest perceived influence.

Moschis and Moore (1979) found no correlation between demographic characteristics (age, gender and social class) and family communication structures and patterns. Carlson et al. (1990a), who looked at birth order of the child and number of children in the family, also report no relationship. In line with earlier research, this study found no relationship between the perception of influence of children and the demographic variables investigated ± gender of child, age and gender of parent, birth order of child and number of children in the family unit.

These findings have implications for the business and marketing strategy. The characteristics that make up the four categories of parents can be used for market segmentation purposes. Marketers must build better profiles of families in the categories that are of interest, as this will enable better targeting both via media and direct marketing activities.

Like any research, this study is not without its limitations. The field research was based on a convenience sample of customers in Malta that frequent a leading play area. Any generalisations to other child entertainment activities and other countries must be done with caution. Respondents had chosen to be in a location that caters for children’s entertainment, implying that the categories reported may not be representative of the entire Malta population. The fact that none of the customers declined to complete the questionnaire might signify that respondents felt obliged to cooperate and might have led to inaccurate responses in some cases. The children that participated in the field research had a mean age of 5.86, which might imply that at times respondents may have been somewhat young to understand precisely the questions asked. Much of the research that is reported in this area has generally involved adolescents who possess a higher level of cognitive ability. It must also be borne in mind that what children perceive to be their influence may be at odds with what their influence really is.

The field research focused on children’s perceived influence on family decisions in relation to parental communication style. Further research could investigate whether parents are in agreement with their children’s perceived level of influence, and how family communication patterns affect family consumer behaviour for specific products and services. Research could focus on the influence of children in choice of products that are shared by the family versus products that are used by parents; products that are intended for private versus public consumption; products that have
entertainment value versus functional usage and products that are durable versus those of a non-durable nature. Family communication patterns can also be used to investigate the effectiveness of advertising of child-related products given that some parents protect their children from the media and whether these vary across countries in an increasingly globalised world.

References


**Appendix. Questionnaires**

Table A1. Questionnaire for children, with mean and standard deviation

Table AII. Questionnaire for the parent with mean, standard deviation and factor loading