CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF
THEIR PARTICIPATION IN RETAIL STORE PATRONAGE DECISIONS

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Abstract

The authors note the relative absence of studies of children's perceptions of their participation in retail store decisions. A sample of 121 fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students tested across four stages of three product decision areas revealed sex-, age-, product-, and subdecision-specific findings implying the operation of complex variables in the child consumer socialization process.

Introduction

While the vast majority of theories, conceptualizations, and empirical research on consumer behavior focuses on individual constructs and decision making processes, there is a substantial subset of concern for joint purchase decision making. The rationale for studying the family rather than the individual consumer stems from the observation that a great many purchases either implicitly pertain to joint decision making as a result of multiple family users of the product. Consistent with the fact that only a relatively small number of theorists and researchers has been working in the family purchase decision making area, is the fact that most findings and knowledge on this area are meager in comparison to those for individual consumer constructs. Nonetheless, a fairly consistent and widely acknowledged set of findings portrays family decision making as exhibiting systematic variance across: phases in the purchase decision process (e.g., problem recognition, search for information, final decision), subdecisions within the particular product purchase decision (e.g., color, style, brand, features), families in various stages of the family life cycle, and socioeconomic classes.

Within the subset of family purchase decision making research, two groups are clearly identifiable. That is, one body of research pertains strictly to the husband and wife and their perceptions of influence and/or participation in purchase decision making. The other group interprets the term "family" literally and attempts to include the influence and/or participation of children in the purchase decision making process under study. No heated controversy exists between the two groups, and there are logical reasons defending the position of either. The intent of this paper, however, is not to address issues to form a conclusion with regard to the efficacy of one approach over the other, but the present research endeavor does concern the influence of children (as perceived by the children themselves) in certain retail patronage decisions.

When one undertakes a review of the family purchase decision literature, one is immediately struck by the paucity of research on child involvement and influence in purchase decision making. Nonetheless, there are two types of data collection methods which have been used to study child involvement in the purchase decision making process. An early study in the marketing literature is the one conducted and reported by Wells and LoSciuto (1966) who made observations of mothers and children in a retail store environment. Their study, while primarily an expository one for the observation method, revealed differential influence of children across three product categories. The greatest influence was observed in cereal purchase decision while less influence, although still distinct, occurred for candy and detergent purchases. A more recent observation study is reported by Atkin (1978) who observed interaction of parents and children in cereal selection. The findings revealed that older children tended to have higher rates of request initiation than did younger children and middle class children tended to have higher rates than did those from the working class. Atkin observed no distinct sex differences.

More studies on family purchase decision making have been conducted with self report methods than have been conducted with observation. At the same time, a wider range of purchase decision areas and potential explanatory variables have been investigated. For example, Brey and Pollay (1968) studied the breakfast cereal brand choice decision and determined that child assertiveness was not associated with brand choice, but child-centerness of mothers was associated, and they therefore posited a "gate keeper" effect. Mhorotra and Torges (1977) investigated a wide spectrum of explanatory demographics, psychographics, and media usage variables and determined that the likelihood of a mother yielding to children influence was a function of product-specific variables. Ward and Wackman (1972) determined that parental yielding was positively related to the age of the child. Jenkins (1978) determined that children influence as perceived by parents vary as a function of their family decision making and was greatest in vacation decisions. He also determined that the amount of perceived influence was positively related to a number of variables, including the number of children in the family, the age of the husband, and the number of years married.

Finally, a handful of studies have been addressed at what may be considered to be "retail" purchase decision areas. Nelson (1978) discovered high versus low child involvement families with regard to pizza restaurant choice decisions. Similarly, Nelson determined that parents of large families perceived more child influence than those in small families. Szybillo and Sosafne (1977) investigated fast food restaurant patronage decisions and determined that children were substantially involved in various decisions and that involvement differed by subdecision. Tootelian and Windeshauser (1976), in a comparative analysis over a 10 year period, concluded that the trend of teenager involvement was for an increased amount of shopping activity with other family members, although personal attire and entertainment items tended to be areas where teenagers acted more independently. Finally, Moschis, Moore and Stephens (1977) reported in their study with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders that shopping goods such as clothing tend to be purchased jointly by adolescents and family members, whereas specialty items tend not to be. They postulate that adolescent-family involvement tends to be functional of social visibility and the price of the product purchased. Despite the fact that they referenced literature suggesting that females are more susceptible to peer influence than males they found no significant sex differences in shoes and clothing but did find significantly more independence for females in health care purchases, shirts, and jeans purchases. Also reported by these authors was a positive association between the amount of purchasing independence and age as well as a curvilinear relationship.
Research Problem

In essence, then the current state of knowledge regarding the relative participation or influence of children in various retail store choice decisions is at a very early, descriptive stage. It appears that child involvement varies by product type, subdecision, sex, and age. The empirical evidence, however, is not definitive, and there is a clear need for further investigation. The focal point of the present research was aimed at children in the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. These grades and corresponding ages were chosen as they define the "transition years" as a child progresses from grammar school to junior high school. Personal observation, intuition, experience, and isolated research findings are all in agreement that this is an especially important time period for children as they experience increasing social pressure from their peers and seek lessened parental control over their activities.

The focal decisions of the research effort were four stages in the retail store choice process. These were: (1) generic need recognition; (2) involvement or participation in suggesting stores to patronize; (3) actual store selection; and (4) engaging in store visitations. At the same time, the research took into consideration three distinct type of products. Based on the findings of previous research, it was decided to use shoes, a personal attire article, toys and games, a personal entertainment item, and birthday gifts for friends, as an example of gift-giving behavior. In all cases, the degree of perceived child participation was assessed on a scale ranging five points from the anchor, "never" to the end point, "All of the time."

The independent variables under consideration of this study were (1) grade level, as a surrogate for age, (2) sex, (3) family size and (4) amount of discretionary expenditures, operationally defined as the child's weekly allowance.

Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses generated for this research effort emerged from a combination of previously cited findings and intuition.

Hypothesis 1: Older children will perceive more participation in retail patronage decisions than will younger children.

Hypothesis 2: Girls will report more participation than will boys for personal attire (shoes) and birthday gifts; whereas, boys will report more participation in purchase decisions for toys and games.

Hypothesis 3: Children from smaller families will report more participation than will children from larger families.

Hypothesis 4: Children with more discretionary income (weekly allowance) will report more participation than will those with less discretionary income.

Methodology

The sample in this study consisted of students in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades attending the LSU Laboratory School in Baton Rouge. Although this type of school typically attracts a disproportionate share of its students from the upper-middle socioeconomic group, this particular school's student body did include some students from the lower-middle and upper-lower classes. In spite of this range, the authors make no claim that the sample is representative.

Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 121 students. The number of male and female respondents was approximately equal, as were the number of students from each of the four grades. The questionnaire used in the study consisted of three types of questions: (1) demographic questions about age, sex, number of children in family, grade level, father's job, mother's job, and amount of weekly allowance which were mostly open-ended; (2) behavioral questions which asked for the extent of participation of the mother, father, and the student in each of the four stages of the purchasing process for each of the three products using the following five-point scale: "Never," "Almost Never," "Sometimes," "Most of the Time," "All of the Time;" and (3) store awareness, store patronage, and store media awareness questions relating to each of the three products which asked for open-ended, recall responses. Only the child participation dependent measures were analyzed in this substudy of the larger research endeavor.

Findings

Preliminary analysis addressed the possible presence of multicollinearity in the dependent variables. Pearson product moment correlation coefficients were computed between the 66 pairings of the 12 dependent measures. It was determined that 29 (or approximately 44%) of the correlations were not statistically significant at or below the .10 level. On the other hand, five of the remaining correlation coefficients were found to exceed +.50. In fact, the highest correlation coefficient was determined to be .60 between selection of a store for a birthday gift and visiting stores for a birthday gift. The results of this analysis led the authors to believe that the multicollinearity problem was present only in a minor sense and that each dependent measure could be analyzed independently.

Analysis then proceeded to tests of research hypotheses. These tests took the forms of significance of differences between means tests. Analysis of variance was used to test for significant differences between grade levels and tests were used to determine differences between boys and girls. For both the family size and weekly allowance independent variables, median splits were approximated based on inspection of the frequencies of responses. For family size, respondents whose families contained three or fewer children constituted the small-family-size group while those with four or more children comprised the large-family-size group. In the instance of weekly allowance, children with an allowance of $3.00 or less per week constituted the low allowance group while those with an allowance of $4.00 or more per week defined the high allowance group.

Table 1 contains the grand means for each of the four retail patronage subdecisions for each of three product categories involved. Inspection of these revealed that, in general, the children sampled perceived themselves as having a relatively high degree of participation in the various facets of the decision making process. In fact, these children had the consistent perception of participating in all the decision areas at least "sometimes" or "most of the time." Variance around the means, of course, was evident with an average standard deviation of approximately 1.1.