

7. The Appearance of Children in a Consumer Society

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Nowadays, children's appearance as costumers is becoming more and more important beside their role in the society. Their consumer habits differ from the habits of the young and adults, which justified the perspective to view children as an insular consumer target group. Children are not just present consumers, but also the influencers of their parents and peers, and future consumers as well, thus the special attention is justified. In addition, children consumer behavior researches reveal that consumer habits developed in childhood may have an effect on their future consumption, which requires a more detailed understanding of consumer habits of children.

The study is based on previous studies and the goal is to give an overall picture about the process how children become consumers, along the main stages of consumer socialization in order to get to know the children, as consumers. Although, consumer socialization is a lifelong learning process, in this present study children are coming to the forefront. The central element of the consumer socialization is the family, in which the parents occupy a special position, but the role of siblings, peers and media are also not negligible. The latter is especially important, because number of studies revealed that free-time activities of children have changed over the years – because of the growth of the information society. While previously children spent their time with their friends outside, nowadays with the appearance of the newest computer tools, leisure activities shifted into indoors. Regarding the media usage habits it can be said that in many cases they use the new media more easily, than their parents and they often teach adult family members about the new opportunities. Based on these, it is important to note, that not only the environment has an impact on children, but children are also able to influence other people, such as their parents. Regarding this, in some cases parents can also learn from their children, which could have a consequence as a re-socialization process, when children could modify the consumer habits of their parents.

Keywords: children, consumer socialization, family

1. Introduction

For many decades, children as a consumer group were not regarded as an important segment. Although, the first researches on children were made in the 1960s, the researches - from the marketing point of view - nominating children as a separate group of consumers trace back to the 1970s. Their role has changed significantly over the past decades due to our changing world. According to some views, children are three markets in one. Firstly, they are the current market that spends money on their desires, secondly, they are the market of influencing their parents, and thirdly, they are the future market for most goods and services (McNeal 1987). This is the reason I have chosen this segment to analyze their consumer decisions and their consumer socialization process.

In this study I am going to summarize the most important and relevant information regarding the topic. In this case, I will give the definition and development of the consumer socialization process. During the introduction of consumer socialization I will write about the most important stages of the process and about the main factors like family, parents, child demographics, and media, which is one of the most relevant factors nowadays. Of course, there are more factors which could have an effect on children consumer socialization and their consumer behavior, but in this study I would like to focus mainly on the family. At the end of the study I am going to summarize my article and introduce my plan for further researches.

2. Consumer socialization

Consumer socialization is a priority from the marketing point of view, because the consumption is becoming more and more important in everybody's life. In the classical economy, consumption means meet the needs. Nowadays, it is important to note, that consumption has become a part of the culture, which is closely related to the social relations system (Swedeberg in Janky et al 2005), as well as the social recognition (Lindenberg in Janky et al. 2005).

Ward (1974) gave one of the first definitions of consumer socialization of children. According to this consumer socialization refers to the *„processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the market place”* (Ward 1974, 2). This theory was improved by the fact that the consumer socialization is an active process, because the individuals studied how others behave, and with this method they collect information about the environment and the economy (Moschis – Churchill 1978). This theory was also improved by Roedder John and Cole (1986). According to the theory of Roedder John, in the consumer socialization process we can distinguish three phases. The first phase is the perceptual stage, which lasts from the age of 3 until age of 7. At this phase, children take simplistic decisions. The second stage is the analytic phase, during which the children are able to examine situations in several ways. In the third phase – called stage of complexity – understanding of the complex problem became important. This phase is relevant between age of 11 and age of 16 (Roedder 1999). It is important to note, that the consumer socialization does not end with the adult division, because it is an ongoing process.

In recent years, two main groups of consumer socialization have been identified, called cognitive factors and environmental factors. Cognitive factors typically associated with the

age of the children, while environmental factors include family, peers, and media. In this article I am going to introduce the mentioned factors.

3. Environmental actors

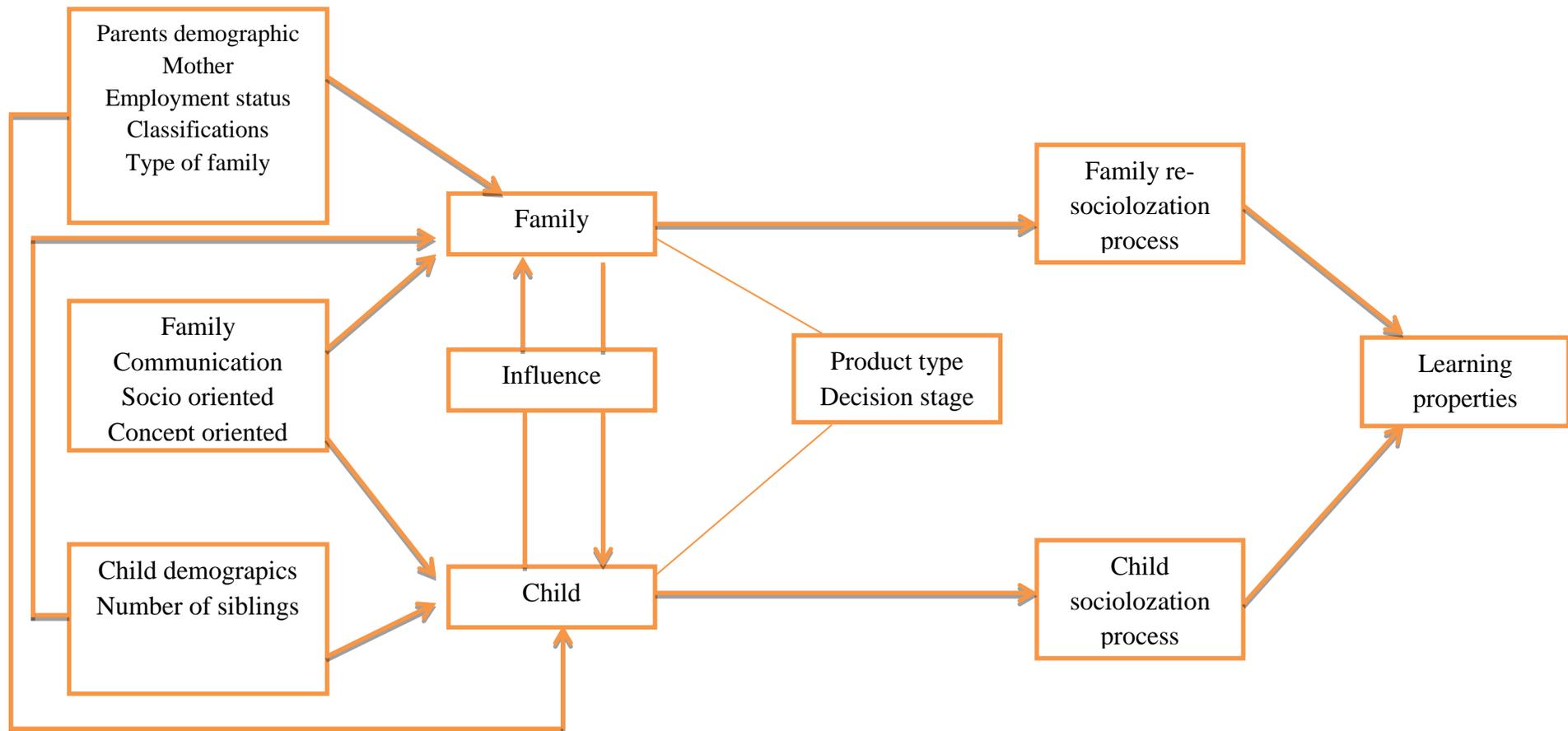
In this part of the study, I am going to write about the main environmental factors, which are summarized in the Figure 1. As you can see, there are several influencers between the environmental factors. This model was introduced by Sharma and Sonwaney (2014), and it shows that children learn from parents, but it is a two-way process, because children are teaching their parents too, how to change their opinions about different products. This proposed model looks at the effect of family variables on the influence of children on their purchase decision-making process. The model needs to be tested, and one of my goals is to make the basis of the research in this study.

3.1. Family

Role of the family is one of the most important socialization agents in children development. However, family members are not chosen by children, the key attributes and values are formed within this framework, which have a major impact on their future decisions and attitudes. The family can be defined in numerous ways. In the statistical surveys family means parents and their unmarried child/children of their household (Andorka 2006). In contrast with it, according to Kotler (2006) there are two families in people's life. One consists of parents, while the other consists of their own children and their wife/husband. Family classification is not a new concept, but really important in children consumer socialization point of view. Giddens (2003) distinguished four family types. Based on it, we define:

- nuclear family (a man and a woman in one household),
- extended family (three or more families living together),
- family of origin (family where we were born),
- generative family (which we enter as adults and within children growing up).

1. Figure Influence of child on family purchase decision and its relation to family variables



Source: own construction based on Sharma – Sonwaney (2014)

It is important to emphasize that family decisions are group decisions, in which different people take part in different roles (Töröcsik 1996), and in this way children too. According to this, children can be influencers, ushers or decision makers as well. Depending on which family members are involved in the decision making, a variety of decisions can be distinguished (Töröcsik 1996):

- Shared decision: In this case all the family members are taking part in the decision making. It is typical when the product requires a larger amount of money.
- Parental decision: Parents taking into account the child's perspective, but they take the final decision.
- Maternal decision: It is typically the case of routine products, that family use every day, and the responsible person for the purchase is the mother and because of this she decides which product to buy.
- Parental individual decision: decisions in which the parents separately buy products for themselves.
- Children decision without conflict: Typical for products, which are important for children and they know a lot of information about it.
- Children decision with conflict: Usually occurs when a product is paid by the parents, but they disagree with the product because of their negative impact or cost.
- Competence decision: Base on the expertise. In some cases the children and parental roles could mix up.

3.2. Parents

Within the family, parents clearly have the greatest impact on the children. This is true in general and in the case of consumer socialization. From the parents, mother has a greater impact. According to studies, mother's materialism level and communication style has an effect on child's future level of materialism. It is true mainly for daughters (Flouri 1999 in Sharma – Sonwaney 2014).

Mother's employment status is also an important factor. According to studies, mother who working in full time status, shopping more than mother with part time status or who are not working (Haynes et al. 1993 in Sharma – Sonwaney 2014). In my opinion, this could be compensation because of the time which they spend separately. On the other hand, there could be the fact that for mothers who work full time is simply easier to afford expensive toys, clothes or other things for their children. The researched question might be raised asking

which one is preferred by the children. The expensive products or the time what they spend together with their mother? In my future researches I would like to deal with this question, but in this study I do not take this problem into consideration.

In connection with parents it is important to mention the different family structures and differences, in this case for broken families, single-parent families and two-parent families. Researches have shown that single-parent families more often do the shopping with the children and children have more possibilities to express their opinions and preferences (Tinson et al 2008). As I see, in single-parent families, where the parent and the children doing more often together the purchases does not mean that they care more about their children. Joint purchase could be the enforcement as well, when the mother or father does not have someone who can take care about the children when they are in the shopping mall. In addition, in single-parent families it is typical that parents do not want conflict with their children and because of this they simply hand down the decision making for children.

3.3. Peers

After the family, peers are the second with whom children spend their time, and it means they could have a serious effect on their consumer habits. Studies showed that individuals with low self-esteem are more sensitive to friends influence (Nuttall – Tinson 2005). These studies also showed that children's could be agents of control for other children and they can give rewards or punishment for peer behavior. In this case we can say that peers are a miniature culture with their norms, and every child has a function in this group (Reise – Sprecher 2009).

Most children have an effect on other children in from the age of 6-8, because this is the time when they find profound friends. The main important factors of their relationship are the loyalty, mutual understanding and the intimacy. In these factors peers effect are more important than the effect of parents or other adults (Vajda – Kósa 2004). Peers have positive and negative effects on children as well. Positive effects could be for example the development of sociological competences, providing support and emotional security, and they give a sense of belonging. Of course there are some negative effects like, consumption of drugs or alcohol (Pikó 2005).

3.4. Media

In the 21st century, the internet changed the media, and with this the consumers' behavior and their attitudes, as well as their post-purchase communication. In the past years a new platform, the social media is introduced and it is more and more important in everybody's life and in the communication as well because there are options to express opinions and experiences (Mangold – Faulds 2009). But this has a side effect too. These sites are available not just for the adults, but also for children where they are not able to distinguish the advertisements and real consumer opinions.

The appearance of children in the social media is a discussion topic not just in Hungary, but also in other parts of the world. The importance of the question is showed by the number of the children in the social media. 22 percentages of the children (10-14 years old) use their favorite social media more than ten times a day (O'Keeffe – Clarke-Pearson 2011). According to a Hungarian research - which made by G data in 2013 – more than quarters of the children below 13 are already registered for Facebook. During the data collection 1000 people, between age of 18 and 75 were asked, who are using the internet at least one time a week. Interesting data, that 4 percent of the responder had no information if the child - who lives in their household – are registered or not for the biggest social media platform¹. The role of the parents has key importance relating in this topic. But it is important to note, that it could happen that children register for the social media without parental approval or with false information. These could have different kind of consequences.

Nowadays, the new technologies like smartphones, tablets are also able to reach social media networks, and it makes the situation more confused, because most of the parents are not monitoring what children on these platforms do. Furthermore, ethics in social media and social media advertisements could also be a research topic, because the advertisements are applied based on the registration data and it could have an effect on their present or future features.

4. Cognitive factor – Child demographics

The demographic characteristics of children also could have an effect on children consumption and consumer decisions. Regarding their decisions one of the most important factors is the age of the children. The older the child is, the greater their contribution in family

¹ http://hvg.hu/tudomany/20130705_atverik_a_facebookot_a_magyar_gyerekek

decisions (Ahuja – Stinson, 1993 in Sharma – Sonwaney 2014). Furthermore, it is important to note that the older the children, the more they became brand-, and price oriented. In addition, it is relevant to mention that younger children usually express their opinions regarding to the foods, while older children express their feelings mainly regarding to the clothes (Ozgen 2003 in Sharma – Sonwaney 2014). In my own researches, I also experienced that for the younger generation sweets and games are more important, while for the older generation fashionable clothes are in their priority. Here I should mention that during the interviews with the parents, they noted several times that they usually make a pre-screening, when they choose the possible products for their children. As I see, pre-screening could be good for both parties, because parents could avoid their children from the harmful, unhealthy or expensive goods, while children will not be angry or unhappy because they can make the final decision what make them satisfied.

Beside the age of the children the number of the children in one family could be also relevant. The more children in one family are, the stricter the parents are (Guneysu – Bilir 1988 in Sharma – Sonwaney 2014). In my opinion, this is a defensive effect and with this they just try to control their children in this way. When there is only one child in the family it is easier to handle when they are angry or unhappy, but when there are more children it is harder to handle the problem and it could have more serious effects.

In addition we have to mention that children in smaller families gain consumer capabilities earlier. It is the result of the way of communication in smaller families, because families with fewer children spend more time with involving of children in family decisions (Sharma – Sonwaney 2014).

5. Future research

In the introduction it has been defined what the socialization process in children's life means. According to this, it is a process when children acquire skills, knowledge's and attitudes, which are relevant to become a consumer in the market. In the consumer socialization the family has a key role, but children also could have an effect on family and family's decision.

With primer researches I want to develop the introduced figure which was made by Sharma – Sonwaney (2014). In my own research I would like to focus on the exemplars of the children and explore which are their reference groups and who are the people who have an effect on them. In addition, I would like to get a picture how the exemplars change in the past

years and decades and what the effect of them is nowadays. During my primary research I will use qualitative methods. First of all, I will make interviews and secondly, I am going to organize focus group interviews as well. My target group would be the children between ages of 10-14. Based on these researches, I am going to consider the mentioned figure and develop it.

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