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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses an integrated model of 'degree of direct influence' to review the direct influence of consumer socialization agents on children consumptions. It suggests that family structure, number of children in the family and financial status can be used as antecedents to model and research the direct influence which have a major impact on child's development as a current and future consumer. Conceptual and methodological issues of the past are discussed later in the paper. Finally, recommendations for further researches are presented.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Family is a locus of relationships, meanings, and values (Stacey 1990), and consumption-related decision making in the context of family life is a core consumer behaviour process (Howard and Sheth 1969; Scanzoni and Szinovacz 1980). Children represent an important target market segment and gain respective attention from the marketing point of view. In today's world children are customers, buyers, spenders, shoppers, consumers and influencers. They are the most influential and play an important role in the consumer market by influencing their parents. This specific market has a big scope which allows marketers to capture and understand the needs of the market. These days, the market segment for children is one of the prime targets for marketers since children have the ability to

influence their parents to buy a specific product which in turn influences the purchasing decisions in the family. Since it is a growing market with enormous opportunities, the marketing industry is trying to figure out how to sell its products to children.

Past researches conducted on consumer socialisation has found that the consumption needs of a child may depend on various factors like parental behaviour, peers and mass media (Deborah Roedder John 1999). Consumer socialisation may be defined as the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Ward 1980). Consumer socialisation is an important aspect in the study of consumer behaviour and decision-making by children. Several socialisation agents, of which parents are one of the most important, play a major role in the consumer socialisation process of children. They have an influence on the extent to which a child accomplishes consumer knowledge through the type, quantity and quality of consumer experiences and the information they share with the child (Roedder John, 1999).

Generally, research on young consumers has followed one of two perspectives:(1) the cognitive development of children as consumers, which assumes children are rational and participative in decision making for their own economic gain (John 1999), and (2) the socio-cultural, which recognizes children as interactive participants in consumption processes (Cramand Ng 1999; Flurry 2007).

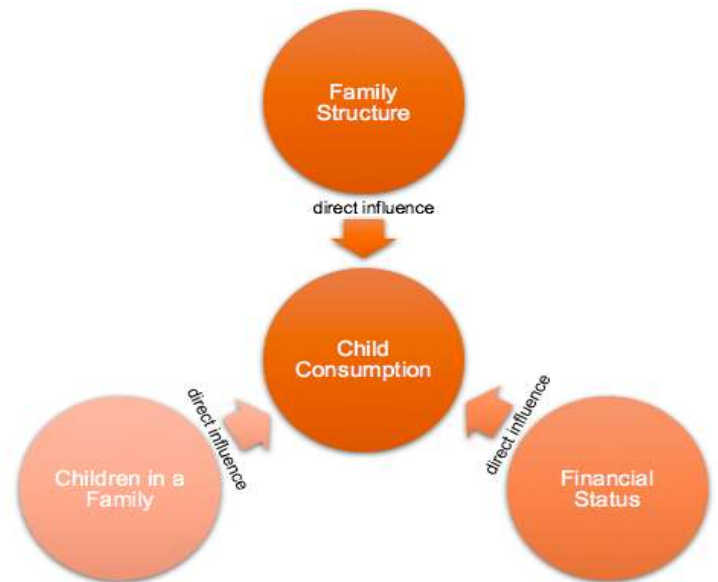
In the recent years, a lot of research has been conducted on how the socializing agents affect the consumption pattern of children but very less importance is given on how the structure and composition of a family can influence consumption needs and behaviour of children. Family structures and dynamics have been changing considerably over the past few years, the Family structure size and composition factor is usually ignored. Most marketing activities and studies focus on the traditional family (Pillot de Chenecy, 2000) and do not pose the question if family composition matters. This research paper proposes the effects of family size, composition and structure on children's consumption. A review of existing literature since the beginning reveals a steady, albeit minimal, interest in single mother families by consumer researchers. Of the dozen published marketing studies since then, they only focused exclusively on single-mother families and traditional families either with single child or a combination of one elder and younger child.

This research paper can potentially aid to the contribution of development of children's consumption in order to examine and enhance the understanding of how the structure of a family including the number of members living in it, parent's marital status, as well as the number of siblings, and the family's financial capacity can influence the development of children as consumers. We would like to investigate if current changes in the Family structure in today's world when the family dynamics are changing (one-parent families when father is the single parent, the situation of step parents in case of re marriage, Gay- lesbian couples adopting children, Twins in the family taking into consideration the gender of both the children, Cousins living in the family when you have an extended family and the

number of Grandparents living in the family ) impact the degree of influence on children. These areas have remain relatively unexplored and received little attention from consumer behaviour researchers. Majority of research has been done on family type mainly focusing on Mothers as single parents or the number of kids in the family focusing on single child or a combination of Elder and younger child. Hence, this study would highlight the limitations and the unattended areas in the existing research which can have an effect on "Children as consumers".

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### A Model of Degree of Direct Influence



*Fig. 1: Illustration of Conceptual Framework*

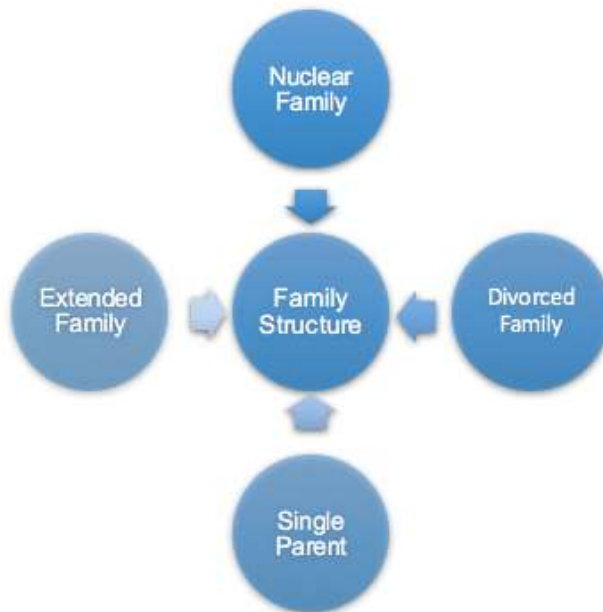
## DEGREE OF INFLUENCE

Family structure has considerably changed over time, leaving very diverse and complex family structures. There has been a significant increase in the number of

single parent families, as well as an increase in stepfamilies. Other complex factors presented within a family include external members who live with a family, this may include grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

Interaction, communication and number of siblings within a family, has a great influence in behaviour, and consumerism is certainly part of the behaviour. Therefore, the elements that influence a children's consumer development exist within the family structure, without omitting the financial status of the family. Having said this, the factors to be analysed will further be detailed.

### **Factor of Influence 1: Family Structure**



*Fig. 2: Illustration of Family Structure*

#### *Single Parent*

In the past decade, several shifts in contemporary family structure can be witnessed. First, almost half of Western European marriages result in divorce, leading to an increase of families with single

parents who are mostly women (Raad van Europa 1997).

Children of single parents (mothers in this case), may be in the need of performing adult tasks that two-parent children will never thought about. This might also be influenced by the shift from the one- to the two-income model (Van Wichelen 2000), due to the increase in workload and therefore the less time invested to their children. However, this phenomenon also leads to overcompensation and a greater influence from the children in the decision making process. Single parents tend to give more liberty to their children in the consumption activities and decisions due to the direct communication between parent and child, whereas two parents present a more protective approach, giving them less power in the decision making process, and to the support both parents have between each other.

#### *Nuclear Family*

In two-parent families, one of them (traditionally the mother), tend to have more time for their children, therefore more time to go shopping together. In contrast, shopping for a busy parent is not an activity that they usually perform (it is the non-working parent's duty). If none of these is the case, and both parents work, then shopping may be considered a quick activity that is performed when needed, and usually in a quick way when coming back from work, leaving few opportunities for children to interact in this activity. However, when the performing of this activity is made during the weekend, and children interact within it, it is more likely that children will have an influence in the decision making process, due to the lack of parent-child interaction during the week. The two parent family structure, while still considered the

"traditional" or the "normal" family structure by most researchers, is not the typical or modal family structure in the United States in the 1990's.

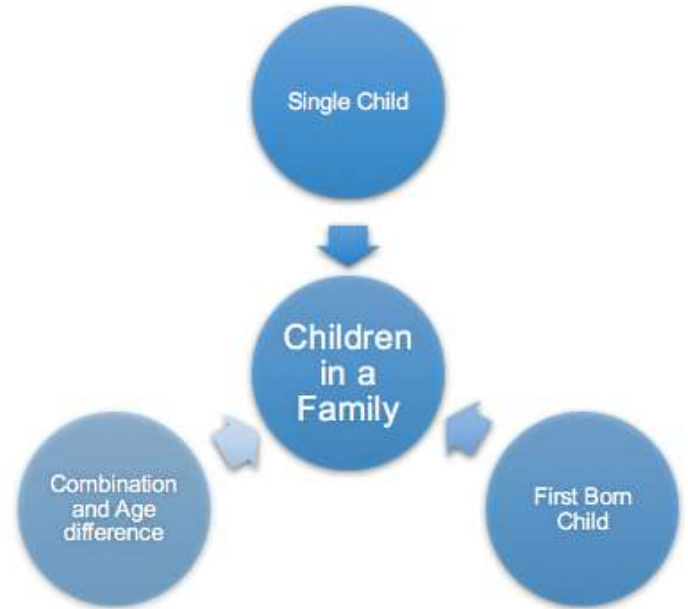
### *Extended Family*

Hirshorn (1998, p.200) found that the current type of activities undertaken by grandparents were specifically " moving the grandparent out of the more traditional older generation in the family roles... and into roles typically assumed by as child's parents. One of the main reason this shift was the increase in number of working parents. Rosenthal and Gladstone (2000) identified grand parenting as a complex social process, which was able to be experienced in a variety of ways, with this process and its meaning shifting over time.

Grandparents can also act as negotiators or buffers for grandchildren, where relationships between grandchildren and their parents were difficult (Tinsley & Parke, 1984). Hence, a child's purchasing influence will be dependent on the behaviour of the grandparent's i.e whether the grandparents are authoritative, permissive, rigid controlling or neglecting. At the age of five, most children make purchases with the help of their parents and grandparents and by 8 years they become independent consumers (Mc Neal, 2003).

The mother in the family is mainly nurturer while the father, or grandfather if living, is seen as dominant and powerful and children obey them with respect and fear. In a joint family, the consumer socialization of the child is presented earlier.

### **Factor of Influence 2: Children in a Family**



*Fig. 3: Illustration of Children in a Family*

Consumer behaviour researchers have been encouraged to study the family, especially with respect to decision making (Sheth 1982; Davis 1976). The fewer children per family, the more money can be spent on each child, leading to an increase in purchase power for each. The influence of children on the purchase decision of cereals, chips, and holidays increases the more siblings they have Dunne (1999) and Mehrotra and Torges (1977). It has been proven that kids in families with two children or less can choose themselves which candy they want after discussing it with their parents. (Maggie Geuens, Vlerick Leuven, 2002). When siblings perceive parental partiality, they tend to develop feelings of conflict, competition and jealousy which in turn make them ask for more products and in some instances this can also increase their purchase influence.

### *Single Child*

Single child take more part in purchasing decisions of a family as parents

tend to give the child more possessions and more allowances in buying things. If both parents are working, then the child has even more purchasing influence. In case of single child, parents provide an adult intellectual environment for their children which gives them the freedom and liberty of making their own decisions about their consumption needs and this remains unchanged from young age to the phase of adolescence. Studies have found that single children with single mother are more involved in purchasing decisions than single child with both parents living together.

#### *First Born Child*

First born children enjoy a greater power position in comparison to their younger siblings. In children's eye power is more conferred most heavily on the eldest son (Furman and Buhremester, 1985). Elder children have more influence in family decision making than younger siblings (Burden 1986; Devall, Stoneman, and Brody 1986) but the later-born/only children have more influence on certain purchases than firstborns. Peters (1985) found that differences existed in the way household tasks were assigned to children in a family.

#### *Gender Difference*

Families tend to overwork their daughters and underwork their sons. Therefore, girls have more influence than boys. The oldest child in the single parent family does significantly more shopping (9.2%) for the family compared to the oldest child in the two parent household (3.19) (Ahuja, Capella and Taylor, 1998). Children's influence in family decision making increased with increase in age of oldest child (Ahuja and Stinson, 1993). Older children preferred to select more of their own clothing for purchase.

Female children had more influence in family decisions than male children (Lee and Collins, 2000). Gender difference was also highlighted in another study which said that female adolescents are more likely to perform socially desirable consumer behaviour than male adolescents. However male adolescents appeared to know more about consumer matters (Moschis and Churchill, 1978).

#### **Factor of Influence 3: Financial Status:**

Children consumer behaviour is also greatly influenced by the financial status of the family. The higher the income level is, the higher the consumption of the family. Blood and Wolfe (1960) defined resources as "anything that one partner may make available to the other, helping the latter to satisfy his needs or attain his goals" and as Foa explains, "Love, service, goods, money, information and status are all social resources". (Foa, 1993) Hence, children tend to have more power in the decision making according to the resources they are accessed to. The more the resources children are exposed to, the higher the confidence and willingness they have to exert more influence in the family decision making process. Families with high financial status are exposed to a wider range of resources hence, resources that children can access are highly depended on the family resources.

#### *Single Income vs Double Income*

Recently, family structure has changed considerably. More one-parent and two-income families are emerging. In Flanders (Belgium), the latter (with 60% of households) is the dominant model (Merckx et al. 1997). The most important consequence of the shift towards more two-

income families is an increase in workload (Merckx et al. 1997). In two-income families and in families with busy parents, as is the case with single-parent families, it may be expected that parents have less time for their children.

Before research, Geuen et al believed that the frequency of co-shopping, concept orientation and the influence of children for specific products is higher while communication about purchases and products and the socio-orientation of parents is lower in two-income as compared to one income families and the more hours the parents work. However, studies demonstrated that for one- vs. two-income families, no significant differences could be found. Concluding that perhaps it is not so much the income differences (resulting from both parents working) that count, but rather the extent to which parents are busy. 'There is hardly any significant influence of the amount of income on parent-child communication. Perhaps it is not so much the income that is important, rather the lack of time resulting from the fact that, to earn this income, both parents have to work more hours'.

## **CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE**

Even though there has been a lot of research on the level of influence children have due to the changes in family structure (Lachance Legault and Bujold, 2000) the influence on children's consumption affected by family size, structure and composition is an area where significant conceptual and research gap exists. Past researches have omitted some factors that nowadays have become pretty characteristically in today's family structure. There is little emphasis on the changing

family dynamics and the influence level of family on consumer socialisation of children.

Previous investigation have focused mainly on being the single child of the family or with a sibling and how they act as a peer group (Pechmann and Knight, 2002) but there is more scope of understanding the depth of the issue. Past research also suffers from a biased focus on traditional nuclear families. Little research on stem families and joint families has been done, and it is in these types of families in which there's a direct impact of uncles, aunts and cousins on the child's consumer socialization development. Actual single parent's research is limited to mothers as the kid's guardian, ignoring the fact that fathers have also become the kid's guardian in many cases.

## **CONCLUSION**

Due to the changing dynamics of family structure, some additional aspects of family composition have become relevant and important that also have a direct influence in the development of children as consumers: (1) a blended family structure, (2) fathers as only paternal figure, (3) homosexual parents, (4) cousins as members of the extended family and (5) twin siblings. This influence has become relevant over time and therefore should be discussed in future research due to the following reasons:

Almost 41% of American children who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the divorce of their parents (Bengston 2001). It is evident that divorce has significant consequences in the children's lifestyle. The number of divorces have considerably increased over time, and marriage durations have become shorter, therefore, remarriages are increasing giving

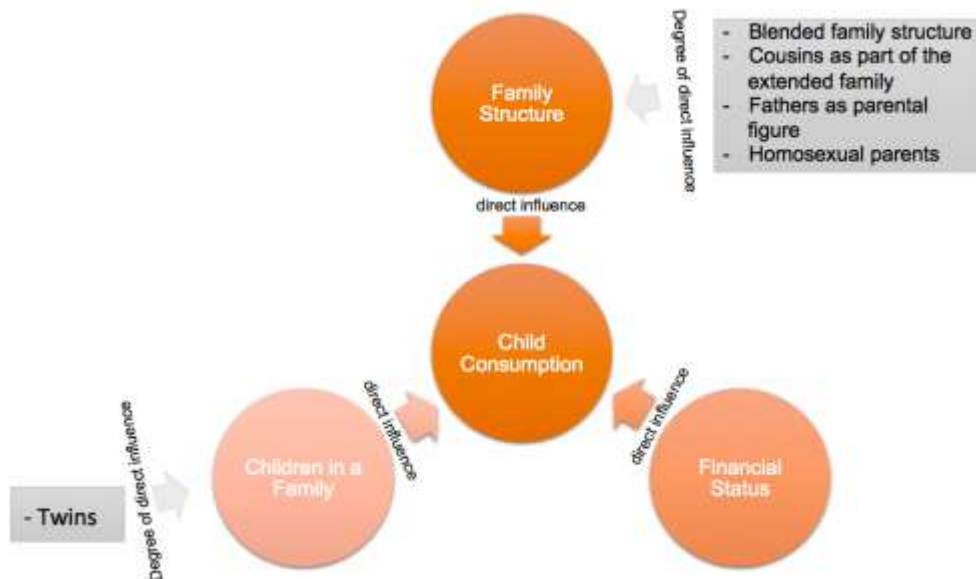


rise to blended families and child-stepparent relationships have increased as well. This definitely has an impact in the children's consumption behaviour, due to the acceptance the stepparent may want to acquire, or the resemblance he/she will present toward the step-child. Step-siblings is also a relevant scenario, due to the restructure of the family.

Also, when talking about divorced parents with child custody and single parents, researchers consider a female-headed single or divorced parent, Stinson and Ahuja for example, examine these mother-child relationship among women with different characteristics, totally omitting single or divorced fathers with child custody, which nowadays is also a common existing situation. Single fathers are less likely to be poor, are more likely to be employed, and are better off overall economically than single mothers (Meyer and Garasky 1993; Bianchi 1995). Much research has been conducted on parents influencing consumer socialization but have omitted the fact that nowadays it has become very common that

homosexual parents are adopting children and raising them. Today, due to the emerging laws of allowance in a great number of states, the research of this factor has turned relevant since a great number of homosexual couples have started to adopt children, and therefore have an impact in the children's behaviour.

When talking about cousins in a family, they act as peer groups for the children within the family but the influence on consumer socialisation of the child from the cousins can be different than the peer groups formed outside the family because of the family constraints. There are also a great number of families that have twins and researches have not gained a lot of information about this group of consumers. Twins have a unique consumption pattern as they are of the same age or the same gender. Researchers should gain more information to understand how the consumption pattern of a twin affects the other and specially when the twins are of different genders



*Fig 4: The revised model of degree of direct influence*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The future research on “Degree of direct influence” should incorporate the new and multi- dimensional aspects of family Structure not focusing only on “Traditional Families” but also taking into consideration the changing family dynamics and the need for understanding the influence of these aspects on the development of a child as current and future consumers. Recently some researchers have started researching and understanding the need to explore the new aspects of Family structure and its components affecting the child’s development as a consumer but there is still scope and need for further extensive research into these components (Ben Kerrane, Margaret K.Hogg, June 2011).

When speaking about blended family structure, researchers have limited to the split up stages, and did not consider what comes later (in some cases): remarriage. Future research can consider the new area of Stepparents and Stepsiblings in order to understand the

needs and consumption behaviour of children in these families. There is also a dearth of empirical research on the topic of homo-sexual parents, their relationship with the child and understanding the degree of influence these parents have on the children’s consumer behaviour.

Moreover, another scope of study can be among twins in the family. Consumption among twins is quite different compared to consumption among siblings with age differences. There is also a difference if the twins are of the same gender compared to twins with different genders. Researches do not go much into these areas which we believe is also an important area to take into account. There is a scope of understanding these type of families and their effect on the children. Finally, The researchers have neglected the aspect of cousins in the family and them acting as a peer group inside the family. The future research can consider the direct impact of this socialization agent and measure the degree of influence cousins have on the children’s consumption in case of extended families.

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