Volume 54 Number 4 Winter 1978

Teenagers' Responses to Retailing Stimuli

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This study examined teenagers' responses to main variables in the retailer's mix including brands, stores, prices, salespeople, and advertising. The data provide information useful in understanding differences in responses among teenage consumers and suggest implications for marketing and retailing strategy formulation.

INTRODUCTION

Marketers and retailers of consumer goods have recently developed increasing interest in the consumer behavior of young people. Because youth comprise a lucrative market, practitioners are interested in understanding their consumer behavior in order to more effectively communicate with them.[1] Marketers also need to understand youths' consumer behavior and how it is acquired in order to design effective consumer education programs for young people.[2]

Although there is a growing interest in the consumer behavior of young people, little empirical basis exists to formulate effective policies. Research is typically of two types: research that examines young people's responses to consumption-related variables and research that focuses on their purchasing processes. Previous studies of young people's responses to consumption-related variables have examined attitudes toward savings and spending, prices,

[1] See for example Scott Ward, "Consumer Socialization," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 1 (September 1974), pp. 1-16; G. W. Schiele, "How to Reach the Young Consumer," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 52 (March-April 1974), pp. 77-86.

[2] Paul N. Bloom and Mark J. Silver, "Consumer Education: Marketers Take Heed," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 45 (January-February 1976), pp. 32-42.

The author acknowledges the assistance provided by Gilbert A. Churchill, Jr., throughout the study.

brands and advertising.[3] The majority of these studies are either exploratory or descriptive based upon little theory and do not report individual differences. Research focusing on young people's purchasing processes, on the other hand, has examined outside influences on their actual and hypothetical consumer decisions and the social environment (shopping role structures) during the purchase of products. The studies have virtually excluded examination of other stages in the decision making preceding the actual purchase.[4]

This article examines teenagers' responses to several retailing stimuli such as brands, stores, salespeople, prices, and advertising. Explanations for individual differences in such responses are sought in factors related to theories of socialization. The socialization perspective was adopted in this study because teenagers' consumer behavior appears to undergo drastic changes during their adolescent years.[5]

BACKGROUND

Previous approaches to the study of the development of youths' consumer behavior are based mainly on two models: the cognitive development model and the social learning model. Studies utilizing the cognitive developmental approach essentially attempt to explain the formation of cognitions and behaviors as a function of age—a proxy variable for cognitive development.[6] Previous studies have

[3] Philip R. Cateora, *An Analysis of the Teen-age Market* (Austin, Texas: Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas, 1963); Don L. James, *Youth, Media, and Advertising* (Austin, Texas: Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas, 1971); James V. McNeal, *Children as Consumers* (Austin, Texas: Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas, 1965); Gladys K. Phelan and Jay D. Schvaneveldt, "Spending and Saving Patterns of Adolescent Siblings," *Journal of Home Economics* Vol. 61 (February 1969), pp. 104-9.

[4] See for example Paul Gilkison, "Teen-agers' Perceptions of Buying Frame of Reference: A Decade of Retrospect," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 49 (Summer 1973), pp. 25-37; George P. Moschis, Roy L. Moore and Lowndes F. Stephens, "Purchasing Patterns of Adolescent Consumers," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 53 (Spring 1977). pp. 17-26, 92.

[5] Moschis, Moore and Stephens, "Purchasing Patterns of Adolescent Consumers"; Roy L. Moore and Lowndes F. Stephens, "Some Communication and Demographic Determinants of Adolescent Consumer Learning," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2 (September 1975), pp. 80-92; George P. Moschis and Roy L. Moore, "An Analysis of the Acquisition of Some Consumer Competencies Among Adolescents," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* (forthcoming); Roy L. Moore and George P. Moschis, "Teenagers' Reactions to Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* Vol. 7 (Fall 1978), pp. 24-30.

[6] Lawrence Kolhberg, "The Cognitive Approach to Socialization," in D. A. Goslin (ed.) *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1969).

examined the effects of adolescent maturation on consumption-related thoughts and behaviors such as attitudes toward advertising and purchasing habits.[7]

The social learning model, on the other hand, explains the formation of thoughts and actions in terms of the person's interactions with various sources of influence, commonly known as "socialization agents," such as parents, peers, and mass media. Consumer behavior patterns are assumed to be formed as a result of influences or forces applied to the child by these agents in various social settings.[8] Operationally, this influence is tapped in terms of the person's extent or frequency of interaction with these agents. Recent research has examined the influences of mass media, parents, school, and peers on the teenager's acquisition of specific consumer skills such as knowledge of legal terms in the marketplace, brand knowledge and motivations for consumption.[9]

This study is concerned with the development of teenagers' affective and cognitive orientations toward major components of the marketer's and retailer's mix: attitudes toward brands, stores, prices, advertising, and salespeople; product knowledge; ability to filter puffery in advertising and seek information prior to decision making. These variables were selected not only because of their importance and relevance to marketing and retailing strategy formulation but also because they have not been adequately investigated in previous research.[10]

It is expected that these criterion variables will be related to variables derived from the main socialization theories. Specifically, age is used to index the child's cognitive development, while the influence of four main consumer socialization agents (mass media, parents, peers, and school) is investigated in terms of the teen's frequency of interaction with these agents. Finally, sex and social class are used as control variables because they help locate the

[7] Moore and Stephens, "Some Communication and Demographic Determinants of Adolescent Consumer Learning"; Moschis, Moore and Stephens, "Purchasing Patterns of Adolescent Consumers"; Moore and Moschis, "Teenagers' Reactions to Advertising."

[8] Ward, "Consumer Socialization."

[9] Moore and Moschis, "Teenagers' Reactions to Advertising"; Moschis and Moore, "An Analysis of the Acquisition of Some Consumer Competencies Among Adolescents."

[10] Ward, "Consumer Socialization"; George P. Moschis, *Acquisition of the Consumer Role by Adolescents*, Research Monograph No. 82 (Atlanta, Ga.: Bureau of Business Research, Georgia State University, 1978).

teenager in his social environment.[11]

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study consisted of 806 teenagers from 13 schools in seven towns and cities in urban, suburban, semirural, and rural Wisconsin. Self-administered questionnaires were completed by respondents in middle schools and senior high schools during May of 1976. The final sample represented a balanced number of both sexes, age groups (12 to 18 year olds), geographical locations, and social classes.

The operationalization and measurement of the main variables is described briefly in Table 1. Each of these variables was constructed by summing appropriate items, using item-to-total correlations to "purify" the measure and then using coefficient alpha to assess the resultant reliability of the scales.[12] Status (class) was measured using Duncan's SES index.[13] Respondents were asked to state their fathers' and mothers' occupations and places of work. Open-ended responses for the father's occupation were used to construct the social class measure. Sex was treated as a dichotomous variable (male = 1, female = 2).

Among the media use variables, the adolescent's newspaper readership and television viewing were used to make the analysis comparative to those of previous studies.[14] Furthermore, media effects were investigated using the transactional model of communication effects (which combines exposure to the medium as well as motivations for using the medium) rather than the hypodermic model (which assumes that exposure to the medium equals effect).[15]

[11] See for example Scott Ward and Daniel Wackman, "Family and Media Influence on Adolescent Consumer Learning," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 14 (January-February), pp. 415-27; Ward, "Consumer Socialization"; Moschis and Moore, "An Analysis of the Acquisition of Some Consumer Competencies Among Adolescents."

[12] Jum C. Nunnally, *Psychometric Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, Inc., 1967).

[13] Ottis D. Duncan, "A Socioeconomic Index for All Occupations," in A. J. Reiss, Jr. (ed.), *Occupations and Social Status* (New York: Free Press, 1961).

[14] Ward and Wackman, "Media and Interpersonal Influence on Adolescent Consumer Learning"; Moore and Stephens, "Some Communication and Demographic Determinants of Adolescent Consumer Learning"; Moschis and Moore, "An Analysis of the Acquisition of Some Consumer Competencies Among Adolescents."

[15] See for example Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual," in J. G. Blumler and E. Katz (eds.), *The Use of Mass Communications* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1974).

Since it has been argued on a theoretical basis that the media "teach" youngsters the expressive aspects of consumption,[16] and there are data to suggest that such learning may be the result of social motivations to use the media,[17] the measures of motivation to view television were designed to tap the respondent's social uses of the medium, including both programming and advertising.

The influence of the explanatory variables was assessed by means of multiple regression analysis after examining the possible presence of intercorrelations among them, which can cause arbitrary allocation of the variance to the independent variables in a given equation. Table 2 shows that the correlations among the 10 independent variables were rather low, with the sum of the reciprocals of the 10 eigenvalues being 12.52, a value which is nearly what it would be for an orthogonal system.[18] Thus, the resulting regression coefficients in the present analysis can be viewed as fairly accurate estimates of the true effects of the respective variables on the dependent variables.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows relationships between explanatory variables and each of the eight dependent variables.

Attitudes Toward Brands. The strongest predictor of attitudes toward brands is the child's social motivations for watching television advertisements ($b = .24$, $p < .001$). Teenagers who watch television commercials to gather information for social reasons are likely to develop and/or possess more favorable attitudes toward brands of products. The amount of television viewing is the second most significant predictor of brand attitudes ($b = .13$, $p < .001$), suggesting that mere exposure to the product brands advertised on television may be sufficient to create favorable attitudes toward them.

[16] T. Parsons, R. F. Bales, and E. A. Shils, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953); David Tiesman and Howard Roseborough, "Careers and Consumer Behavior," in Lincoln Clark (ed.), *Consumer Behavior*, Vol. II, *The Life Cycle and Consumer Behavior* (New York: New York University Press, 1955).

[17] Ward and Wackman, "Media and Interpersonal Influence on Adolescent Consumer Learning"; Moore and Stephens, "Some Communication and Demographic Determinants of Adolescent Consumer Learning."

[18] See for example A. E. Hoerl and R. W. Kennard, "Ridge Regression: Biased Estimates for Nonorthogonal Problems," *Technometrics*, Vol. 12 (February 1970), pp. 55-67.

The least statistically significant predictors of brand attitudes are social motivations for watching television programs ($b = -.09$, $p < .027$) and newspaper readership ($b = -.07$, $p < .040$). Both explanatory variables have in common the information seeking aspect of the person's communication behavior, suggesting that young people who seek information from the mass media are likely to be aware of alternatives and evaluative purchasing criteria available to them and may attach lesser significance to the product's brand name as a criterion in purchasing decisions.

Attitudes Toward Stores. Sex was the strongest predictor of attitudes toward stores ($b = -.12$, $p < .001$), suggesting that males tend to have stronger favorable attitudes toward commercial stimuli than females. Of similar importance and magnitude was newspaper readership ($b = -.11$, $p < .002$), suggesting that newspapers may be a dispenser of store-related information which makes young people aware of alternative retail outlets. The last significant predictor of store attitudes was age ($b = .11$, $p < .006$), suggesting that affective orientations toward stores may develop as a function of the teenager's cognitive development or experiences with shopping and retail facilities.

Attitudes Toward Prices. Age was also an important predictor of attitudes toward prices ($b = -.16$, $p < .001$). Perhaps the person's shopping experience increases his understanding of pricing techniques in the marketplace, which in turn decreases his confidence in price as an indicator of product quality or performance. It is also possible that teenagers may become aware of other product attributes of equal or greater importance which may also lead to lower evaluations of price as a significant attribute in decision making. Heavy viewers of television are less likely to hold favorable attitudes toward prices ($b = -.10$, $p < .011$), whereas frequency of newspaper readership is positively related to favorability of attitudes toward prices ($b = .08$, $p < .033$).

Attitudes Toward Salespeople. No significant predictors of this variable were revealed. This finding suggests that the formation of attitudes toward salespeople may occur in a positive direction for some teenagers and in a negative direction for others as a result of adolescent experiences with salespeople. It is possible that department stores, which are likely to be visited by upper class adolescents, may employ more experienced and consumer-oriented salespeople than discount stores.

Table 1

DESCRIPTION OF THE VARIABLES*

Construct	Operational Definition	Measure	Number of Items	Reliability Coefficient Alpha
A. Criterion Variables				
1. Attitudes toward Brands	Affective and cognitive orientations toward familiar brand names of products, and brand names as indicators of product quality and performance.	5-point agree-disagree scales. Items such as "I prefer a certain brand of most products I buy."	5	.50
2. Attitudes toward Stores	Affective orientation toward stores and cognitive orientation concerning the name of the store as indicator of product quality and performance.	5-point agree-disagree scales. Items such as: "I judge the value of some products by the name of the store that sells them."	4	.52
3. Attitudes toward Prices	Cognitive and affective orientations toward price-product relationships concerning prices as indicators of product quality and performance.	5-point agree-disagree scales. Items such as: "Many products sold at reduced prices are never really on sale at all."	4	.28
4. Attitudes toward Salespeople	Affective and cognitive orientations concerning the integrity, friendliness of salespeople; and belief in and helpfulness of salespeople.	5-point agree-disagree scales. Items such as: "Salespeople are honest."	5	.56

5. Attitudes toward Advertising	Cognitive and affective orientations concerning liking of and belief in advertising; efficacy and purpose of advertising and liking of advertising in various media.	5-point agree-disagree scales. Items such as: "Most television commercials are fun to watch."	10	.54
6. Puffery Filtering	Ability to discriminate facts from exaggerations in advertising.	12- to 36-point accuracy index representing correct responses to advertising claims measured on "believe it is completely true-partly true-not true at all" scales. Items contained various amounts of puffery as determined in a pretest. For example: "State Farm is all you need to know about insurance." (Puffery)	12	.25
7. Information Seeking	Expressed need to consult various sources of consumer information prior to hypothetical purchases.	5- to 30-point index representing the need to consult six sources of consumer information (friends, TV ads, print ads, parents, *Consumer Reports*, and salespeople) prior to purchasing five products.	30	.37

Table 1
DESCRIPTION OF THE VARIABLES*

Construct	Operational Definition	Measure	Number of Items	Reliability Coefficient Alpha
8. Product Knowledge	Ability to understand and retain information on products claimed to be different on specific attributes.	0- to 12-point accuracy index representing correct identification of product names on the basis of incomplete product-attribute descriptions made on TV commercials. Items such as: "__ makes 0 to 50 miles in 8.2 seconds."	12	.86
B. Explanatory Variables				
1. Family Communication about Consumption	Overt interaction between parent and adolescent concerning goods and services.	5-point very often-never scales. Items such as: "My parents and I talk about buying things."	12	.64
2. Peer Communication about Consumption	Overt peer-adolescent interactions concerning goods and services.	5-point very often-never scales. Items such as: "My friends and I talk about buying things."	6	.78
3. Newspaper Readership	Adolescent's frequency of reading specific items in newspaper.	5-point everyday-never scales. Items such as "comics" and "news about the economy."	5	.66

4. Television Viewing	Adolescent's frequency of viewing specific program categories.	5-point everyday-never scales. Categories such as "movies" and "cartoons."	7	.67
5. Social Motivations for Watching TV Shows	Motivations to watch TV shows as a means of gathering information about life styles and behaviors associated with uses of consumer products.	0- to 10-point scale representing positive responses to TV show viewing for reasons such as "To learn what things to buy to make good impressions on others."	10	.70
6. Social Motivations for Watching TV Ads.	Motivation to watch TV ads as a means of gathering information about life styles and behaviors associated with uses of consumer products.	0- to 10-point scale representing positive responses to TV ad viewing for research such as "to find out what kinds of people use certain products."	10	.84
7. Formal Consumer Education	Number of consumer-related courses taken at school.	Summated index of the number of courses respondent completed in the following areas: consumer education, home economics, economics, environmental sciences, guidance, and "other."	6	.34

* For a detailed description of variables, including rationale for operational definitions and measures, see George P. Moschis, "Acquisition of the Consumer Role by Adolescents," Madison, Wisc Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Graduate School of Business, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1976.

Attitudes Toward Advertising. The strongest predictor of this dependent variable was the teenager's social motivations for watching television advertisements ($b = .26$, $p < .001$). Thus, to the extent that advertisements offer gratification of social needs (e.g., provide a basis for interpersonal communications), the child tends to develop favorable attitudes toward advertising. Another strong predictor of teenage attitudes toward advertising was peer communication about consumption ($b = .12$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the development of favorable advertising attitudes may be a consequence of complex interpersonal processes regarding consumption.

Age is also an important predictor of advertising attitudes ($b = -.10$, $p < .005$), suggesting that teenagers are becoming more skeptical of advertising claims and develop a greater cognitive defense toward them as they grow older. Finally, consumer-related courses taken at school are fairly good predictors of advertising attitudes ($b = .08$, $p < .018$), suggesting that such courses may provide information concerning the positive aspects of advertising or that students taking consumer-related courses may have favorable predispositions toward advertising.

Puffery Filtering. Adolescents who watch television commercials for social reasons are less likely to be able to filter puffery in advertising ($b = -.13$, $p < .002$) than those who do not watch for such reasons. Nevertheless, those who watch television programs for social reasons appear to possess this skill to a significantly greater extent than those who do not watch ($b = .10$, $p < .012$). This consumer skill is also positively related to newspaper readership ($b = .09$, $p < .014$), social class ($b = .08$, $p < .021$), and communication with peers ($b = .08$, $p < .039$). Apparently, active interaction with various sources of consumer information increases the teenager's capability to differentiate facts from exaggerations in advertising.

Information Seeking. Three communication variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in this dependent variable. The strongest predictor was the teenager's social motivations for watching television shows ($b = .11$, $p < .006$), followed by communication with peers about consumption matters ($b = .10$, $p < .009$), and newspaper readership ($b = .09$, $p < .015$). Taken together, these findings show that adolescent consumers who actively seek information from the media and from peers are also likely to seek information before they make a decision. All three antecedent variables approached significance. Upper social class adolescents are more likely to seek a greater amount of information than their lower-class

Table 2

CORRELATION MATRIX FOR INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Family Communication	1.00									
2. Television Viewing	.22	1.00								
3. Social Motives: TV Shows	.18	.28	1.00							
4. Social Motives: TV Ads	.12	.29	.54	1.00						
5. Newspaper Reading	.11	.17	.02	−.01	1.00					
6. Peer Communication	.33	.06	.17	.13	.14	1.00				
7. Courses	.11	02	.01	.00	.11	.06	1.00			
8. Age	−.11	.08	−.16	−.21	.21	.13	.12	1.00		
9. Social Class	.01	−.30	−.03	−.11	.08	.10	−.02	.09	1.00	
10. Sex	.07	−.04	.10	.09	−.12	.13	.28	−.05	.03	1.00

counterparts ($b = .07$, $p < .052$). Similarly, older adolescents tend to seek more information prior to decision making than do younger adolescents ($b = .07$, $p < .058$). Finally, female adolescents appear to seek more information for decision making than do male adolescents ($b = .06$, $p < .092$).

Product Knowledge. Two media use variables were strong predictors of this consumer skill: newspaper readership ($b = .17$, $p < .001$) and television viewing ($b = .11$, $p < .003$). Given the nature of the measure for this consumer skill, these predictors could best be viewed as control rather than explanatory variables, i.e., exposure to mass media is a necessary condition for learning this skill. Sex and age could best be considered the true explanatory variables. Females apparently have a greater ability to remember commercial stimuli than do males ($b = .16$, $p < .001$). This ability may also be acquired as a result of maturation ($b = .14$, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

While the predictor variables considered in these multiple regression equations account for significant variations in the criterion measures, a large portion of the variation in each criterion is still unexplained. Obviously, other variables also affect youths' responses to marketing and retailing stimuli such as those examined in this research, and this should be kept in mind in formulating strategy. Nevertheless, the results provide information useful in understanding the consumer behavior of teenagers and incorporating such knowledge into decision making. Because the explanatory

Table 3

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EXPLANATORY VARIABLES AND DEPENDENT CONSUMER SKILL MEASURES

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables (1) Brands	(2) Stores	(3) Prices	(4) Sales-people	(5) Adver-tising	(6) Puffery Filter.	(7) Info. Seek.	(8) Product Knowledge
Family Communication	−.05	.05	−.05	.04	.00	−.07	−.03	−.03
Peer Communication	.06	.04	.02	.05	.12*	.08*	.10*	.04
Newspaper Read	−.07*	−.11*	.08*	.03	.03	.09*	.09*	.17*
TV Viewing	.13*	.02	−.10*	−.00	.07	−.05	.01	.11*
Social Motives: TV Shows	−.09*	.07	.04	−.01	−.00	.10*	.11*	−.02
Social Motives: TV Ads	.24*	.07	−.05	.03	.26*	−.13*	.04	.01
Courses	−.05	−.07	.05	.05	.08*	−.03	−.01	.01
Age	−.00	.11*	−.16*	−.00	−.10*	.01	.07	.14*
Social Class	−.05	−.03	.05	.05	−.05	.08*	.07	.07
Sex	.02	−.12*	−.01	−.06	.03	.05	.06	.16*
Multiple R	.30	.23	.17	.12	.38	.22	.25	.31

NOTE: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients (beta-weights) between the independent variables and the eight dependent variables. Asterisk (*) denotes that the variable in the equation accounts for a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable ($p = .05$).

variables were derived from socialization theories, the findings are useful in understanding the "why" of behavior of these consumers. It suggests, for example, that brand preferences may be acquired as a result of the youth's interaction with the mass media, rather than through increasing experience with the marketplace as the child matures.

The findings of this study suggest several implications for marketers and retailers of products consumed by the youth market. First, the data suggest that during their adolescent years, the responses of young consumers to the variables in the manufacturer's and retailer's mix are likely to undergo formation and change. For example, younger adolescents are more likely to respond favorably to advertising and price appeals; they are less likely to respond favorably to store-related attributes. Therefore, practitioners should adjust their marketing efforts according to the age of their target market.

Second, the mass media apparently play an important role in the formation of young people's attitudes and knowledge. Teenagers appear to acquire different types of consumer information from different types of media and through different processes. For example, teenagers seem to learn from newspapers about a product's functional or objective attributes (e.g., price), while television advertisements showing social uses of products are likely to have a greater impact on the formation of favorable attitudes toward brands of advertised products. Thus, depending upon the retailer's advertising objectives (e.g., inform, change attitudes) different types of media should be used for maximum effectiveness.

Finally, marketing and retailing strategies should reflect the sex and socioeconomic composition of the target market(s). For example, male teenagers are more likely to develop favorable orientations toward stores than their female counterparts. Thus, the retailer's efforts to create loyalty to his store among the youth should take into account these sex differences. Female teenagers appear to acquire information pertaining to product attributes to a greater extent than do their male counterparts and they might be more receptive to comparative advertising.