

FAMILY COMMUNICATION INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: SOME ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

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Abstract

The importance of family in consumer socialization has been shown in a large number of studies. This paper deals with the influences of family communications on the development of consumption-related behavior patterns. It presents additional data that suggest family communication patterns may be important in shaping the consumer behavior of young people.

Introduction

Understanding adolescent consumer behavior and its development may help us to understand adult consumer behavior. In fact, most patterns of adult purchasing behavior are acquired early in life (Olshavsky and Granbois 1979). Moreover, adolescence is believed to be a crucial time for socialization and a period during which much consumer learning seems to be taking place (Ward 1974; Moore and Stephens 1975; Moschis 1976). Consequently, recent consumer research has focused on consumer socialization, especially the effects of interpersonal and mass communication on the development of consumer behavior. Previous consumer socialization studies have examined, for example, the influence of family, television, and peers on the development of patterns of consumer decision-making such as information seeking, buying motives, and product evaluation (Moschis 1976; Moore and Stephens 1975; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977).

Although the family is considered an important agent in consumer socialization, and parents are preferred about twice as much as any other source of consumer information (Moschis and Moore 1979a), most of the research has treated family influence as a variable mediating media effects, especially with respect to television (Robertson 1979), with little attention being directed toward establishing the role of family communication processes in adolescent consumer behavior. In addition, research concerning family communication has focused primarily on the frequency of interaction rather than on the pattern or quality of the interaction.

Conceptualization

The typology of parent-child communication structures and patterns as developed by McLeod and Chaffee (1972) provides a useful vehicle for analyzing the quality of family interaction and its effects on consumer learning. The family communication patterns typology utilizes Newcomb's (1953) co-orientation model. Family communication structures refer to the two relatively uncorrelated dimensions which have been found repeatedly. The socio-oriented dimension is characterized by stressing A-B relationships and seems to produce deference and to foster harmonious and pleasant social relationships. On the other hand, the concept-oriented structure stresses A-X relationships and emphasizes helping the child to develop his/her own individual views of the world by imposing positive constraints.

Together, the two dimensions of family communication structure yield a four-fold typology of family communication patterns: *laissez-faire*, protective, pluralistic, and consensual (McLeod and Chaffee 1972) [Figure 1]. *Laissez-faire* families emphasize neither of the two dimensions and there is little communication between parents and children. *Protective* families emphasize the socio-orientation dimension, stressing obedience and

social harmony, and are not concerned with conceptual matters. Conversely, *pluralistic* families tend to stress the concept-orientation dimension, with an emphasis being placed on mutuality of respects and interest. Children are encouraged to explore new ideas and to express them openly without fear of reprisal. Finally, *consensual* families stress both the socio- and concept-orientation dimensions, and children are encouraged to explore the world about them but to do so without disrupting the family's established internal social harmony.

One of the most important factors in a child's development of consumer skills, knowledge, and attitudes is held to be intrafamily communication about consumption (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis 1976; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977). Effective consumer learning has also been found to be closely tied to the patterns of communication taking place within the home environment (Moschis and Moore 1978 and 1979b). Moschis, Moore, and Smith (1983) investigated the effects of both family communication patterns and family communication about consumption affairs, knowledge, consumer activities, and consumer role perceptions and found that the family communication pattern typology was significantly better than communication frequency measures in explaining consumer activity (defined as the ability to buy and use products and services in a rational and efficient manner).

Although various studies have examined consumer learning and particular stages of the decision-making process, none have looked specifically at the effects of family communication patterns on the development of adolescent purchasing behavior. The purpose of this paper is to extend existing consumer socialization research by investigating the effects of different family communication patterns on the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of the purchase process. The general hypothesis made in this study is that the adolescent's purchasing behavior is conditioned by the structure of parent-child communication roles in the home environment. Specifically, the family communication pattern (FCP), as a generalized socializing influence (see McLeod et al. 1982; McLeod and O'Keefe 1972; Chaffee et al. 1971; Sheinkopf 1973), would hypothetically lead to (a) different attitudes about brands and the marketplace in general, (b) different levels of adolescent shopping independence, (c) different perceptions of sex-roles, (d) different forms of conflict resolution, and (e) different levels of consumer discontent (post-purchase).

Hypotheses

A recent review of the role of family communication in consumer socialization suggests relationships between family communication patterns and various aspects of the youth's consumer behavior (Moschis 1985). One general proposition is that the pluralistic FCP pattern fosters the development of consumer competencies. Among these families, parental encouragement and the child's freedom to explore controversial issues and make up his/her own mind is likely to result in greater satisfaction with his/her choices in the marketplace and to foster skepticism about the marketplace at an earlier age than children from other types of backgrounds. In addition, political socialization research suggests that pluralistic children are more likely to develop party "loyalties" earlier than other children (McLeod and Chaffee 1972). Finally, the family's emphasis on

mutuality of respects and interests is likely to encourage not only more independence in purchasing decisions but also an egalitarian family decision-making pattern and a conflict resolution style that incorporates the children's input. The preceding discussion suggests the following hypotheses.

H1: Pluralistic children are more likely than their counterparts to (a) be satisfied with the products they buy/use--i.e. experience less discontent; (b) have more negative attitudes toward the market place; (c) have preferences for brands; (d) experience family independence in purchasing products; (e) have egalitarian sex-role perceptions; and (f) have a syncretic family-role structure.

Another general proposition is that the protective FCP pattern contributes to the person's susceptibility to outside-the-home influences, both commercial and non-commercial (Moschis 1985). In these families, the child has few opportunities to participate in family decisions due to the hierarchy of power structure accepted by, or imposed upon, its members, and he/she is constrained from developing his/her own views. Specifically, his/her consumer field of choices is rather limited, has fewer opportunities to explore controversial issues, which may result in less satisfaction with his/her choices on the marketplace, and has less family independence. Moreover s/he functions in a highly authoritative family with fewer opportunities for participation in family/decisions. Thus, one would expect the protective child to be the opposite of the pluralistic child.

H2: Protective children are less likely than their counterparts to (a) be satisfied with the products they buy/use; (b) have more positive attitudes toward the marketplace; (c) have preferences for brands; (d) experience family independence in purchasing products; (e) have egalitarian sex-role perceptions; and (f) have a husband dominant family-role structure.

Children from laissez-faire families spend little time communicating with their parents. While there is no evidence to suggest that a lack of communication is better or worse than the socio-oriented communication structure, one would expect little or no communication about family decisions among laissez-faire family members.

H3: Children from laissez-faire families are less likely than children from other family backgrounds to report a syncretic family-role structure.

Consensual families stressing both types of orientations often present conflicting views and alternatives to the child. They encourage the child to take an interest in the world of ideas and develop his/her own views/opinions, and also to respect the hierarchy of family power structure and parental views. Because the views the child develops on his/her own are not always in line with those of his/her parents, there is a tendency among consensual children to use outside-the-family referents as a means of determining "reality," and to seek escape from this conflicting situation by adopting the norms and values of outside sources of information, including commercials (McLeod and Chaffee 1972). This is likely to make them not only more susceptible to such influences but also less satisfied with the products they buy/use because of their greater reliance upon commercial stimuli in the marketplace.

H4: Consensual children are more likely than children from other family backgrounds to (a) have positive attitudes toward the marketplace; and (b) experience greater dissatisfaction with products they buy/use.

#### Method

Data for the study were gathered from 734 adolescents

who completed self-administered questionnaires during regular classroom hours in one middle and one high school in each of six counties of a Southern state. The selected schools were determined to be representative of the urban, suburban, rural, and semi-rural regions of the state on the basis of personal interviews conducted with school administrators. The resultant sample, though not randomly selected, proved to be demographically representative of the area with respect to sex (49% male; 51% female), age (53% middle school; 47% high school), race (11% black; 88% white), and socio-economic status as measured on Duncan's (1961) (scale mean = 45.3).

#### Criterion Variables

Employing the commonly-used consumer decision-making framework, six dependent variables were developed to coincide with the three primary stages of the purchasing process: pre-purchase disposition/attitude, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. Measurement of these variables was achieved by summing the appropriate items and using the coefficient alpha to assess the resultant reliability of the scales. The range of the reliability coefficients was above the .50 minimum recommended by Nunnally (1967).

Brand preference is operationally defined to mean the extent to which an adolescent has a favorite brand for various products and was measured in line with previous research (e.g., Ward et al. 1977; Moschis and Moore 1979a). Respondents were asked to indicate their favorite brand for 12 randomly selected consumer products, evenly distributed between 1) those products used by a child vs. those not used by a child and (2) products heavily vs. lightly advertised. If respondents indicated a brand preference, a score of 1 was assigned, and if none was indicated, a score of 0 was assigned. A 0- to 12-point index was developed to indicate a measurement of the respondent's brand preference.

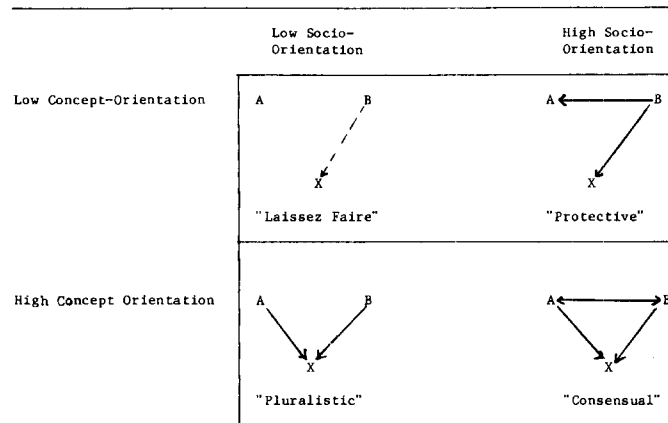
Attitude towards the marketplace means the cognitive and affective orientation of the respondent toward (1) various marketing stimuli such as advertising, stores, prices, and salespeople, and (2) general attitudes toward businesses. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement, using 5-point scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with statements such as, "The more famous the store, the better the product it sells," and "Today's consumers are being taken advantage of by companies."

Variables considered relevant at the purchase stage included shopping independence, egalitarian sex-role perceptions, and conflict resolution process.

Shopping independence indicates the degree of the adolescent's purchasing independence by determining his/her social environment during the actual purchase. Respondents were asked to indicate the circumstances under which they would purchase eight products: wrist watch, hair dryer, flash cubes, sunglasses, pocket calculator, wallet, pair of dress shoes, and household batteries. The purchasing situation choices given the respondent were alone, with friends, with family member(s), or ask someone in the family to purchase the item. By combining responses to the first two categories (alone or with friends), a 0- to 8-point index was developed which represented the adolescent's independence in purchase.

Egalitarian sex-role perceptions is operationally defined to mean the adolescent's perception of the relative influence of husband and wife in family decision making. Respondents were presented with 12 different decisions representing various degrees of husband-wife specialization with four response alternatives: "husband should have the most say," "wife should have the most say," "husband and wife should have equal say," and "I don't know." Respondents were asked who, "in a

FIGURE 1  
FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERN TYPOLOGY INTERPRETED  
BY RELATIONS FROM NEWCOMB'S ABX



Key: A = the child, B = the parent; X = the topic  
Arrows indicate relations stressed in particular family type

Source: McLeod and O'Keefe (1972)

TABLE I

ADOLESCENT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR  
BY  
FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERN

Adolescent Purchasing Behavior	Laissez-Faire	Pluralistic	Protective	Consensual	Mean Raw Score Overall
Brand Preferences	-.19**	+.12*(E)	-.05(E)	+.09	18.46 (3.14)
Attitudes Toward the Marketplace	-.07	+.16***(E)	-.05(O)	+.24***(E)	15.48 (3.76)
Consumer Discontent	-.11	-.09 (E)	.00	+.18***(E)	25.44 (3.18)
Purchasing Independence	.00	+.12*(E)	-.08(E)	-.06	2.69 (1.80)
Egalitarian Sex-Role Perceptions	-.07	+.21***(E)	-.07(E)	-.08	6.31 (2.19)
Conflict Resolution Process					
° Father Decides	-.09	-.12*	+.15*(E)	+.08	3.07 (1.23)
° Mother Decides	-.13*	.00	.00	+.12	3.15 (1.06)
° Child Decides	-.08	+.08	-.10	+.06	2.20 (1.00)
° Family Vote	-.15*(E)	+.13*(E)	-.14	+.11*	2.68 (1.45)
(N)	(181)	(199)	(144)	(210)	(734)

Entries are standard scores based on weighted means, setting the overall mean at zero and the standard deviation at unity within each row. The overall raw mean score and standard deviation (in parenthesis) measure is shown in the table at the far right.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

E -- indicates nature of relationship was in expected direction hypothesized.

O -- indicates nature of relationship was in opposite direction hypothesized.

family with small children...should have the most say in..." six different categories, two decisions in each. The extent of egalitarian sex-roles in family decision making was measured by summing the "equal say" response to form a 0- to 12-point index.

Conflict resolution is a measure of the relative influence of various family members in purchasing situations where there is disagreement among family members. Respondents used a 5-point scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most of the time, and 5 = almost always) to indicate which of the following was the primary decision-maker in conflict situations: father, mother, children, or all members (syncratic).

Consumer discontent was the one main variable considered relevant to the post-purchase stage of the purchase process. This variable concerns cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies toward products and product performance following purchase. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of agreement or disagreement, using a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5), with statements such as "Some things I buy do not work as well as they are supposed to."

#### Independent Variables

Six items were used to measure each communication dimension. (All the scale items with instructions used are shown in the Appendix). Items designed to measure the socio-orientation dimension included:

[Your parents] say that they know what is best for you and you shouldn't question them.

[Your parents] want to know what you do with your money.

Examples of items used to measure the concept-orientation dimension were:

[Your parents] say you should decide yourself how to spend your money.

[Your parents] ask your advice about buying things.

Responses to these and similar items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from "very often" to "never." Responses were then summed across the six items used to measure each dimension.

Internal consistency (coefficient alpha) for the items was established in previous consumer socialization research (Moschis and Moore 1978). Internal validity was confirmed through the application of factor analysis. Two factors representing each dimension of family communication structure were extracted using principal components analysis (varimax rotation). Further, for the present study, all items intended to measure each concept were loaded on their respective hypothesized family communication structure. Responses were not significantly affected by the respondent's demographic characteristics (Moschis et al. 1983).

#### Results

Table 1 shows the results of analysis of variance used to test the hypotheses. Generally, the results support Hypothesis 1. Specifically, pluralistic adolescents are more likely than adolescents from other family backgrounds to have more negative attitudes toward the marketplace ( $p < .01$ ) (Hypothesis 1b), have preferences for brands ( $p < .05$ ) (Hypothesis 1c), have greater purchasing independence ( $p < .05$ ) (Hypothesis 1d), and they are more likely to hold egalitarian sex-role perceptions ( $p < .01$ ) (Hypothesis 1e) and have syncratic family-role structures ( $p < .05$ ) (Hypothesis 1f). The data did not support the hypothesis that pluralistics are less dissatisfied with the products they buy or use,

although the nature of the relationship was in the expected direction.

The data did not provide adequate support for Hypothesis 2, regarding relationships between protective FCP and consumer behavior. Although the nature of the relationships was in the expected direction, protectives were not more likely than their counterparts to score lower on measures of purchasing independence, brand preferences, attitudes toward the marketplace, and consumer discontent, nor were they more likely to hold traditional sex-role perceptions. The data, however, supported Hypothesis 2f, showing that protective families are characterized by a husband-dominant family role structure ( $p < .05$ ). Perhaps the pluralistic child's susceptibility to outside-the-home influences may only apply to informal social rather than to commercial influences in the marketplace (Moore and Moschis 1978).

With respect to the hypothesis concerning laissez-faire families support was provided for the notion that there is little interaction about consumption among its members when conflict occurs (Hypothesis 3). Finally, the data provided adequate support for Hypotheses 4a and 4b concerning consensual children. Specifically, consensuals were more likely than adolescents in other groups to have positive attitudes toward the marketplace ( $p < .01$ ) and to express greater dissatisfaction with products they buy or use ( $p < .01$ ).

In addition, the data in Table 1 show other significant relationships that were not hypothesized. Specifically, laissez-faire adolescents are less likely to have preferences for brands than adolescents in any other group ( $p < .01$ ). When it comes to resolving conflict in the family, the father is less likely to decide what the family should do among pluralistics, and the mother is less likely among consensuals ( $p < .05$ ). Consensuals are less likely to adopt a syncratic family role structure ( $p < .05$ ).

#### Discussion

While not all hypotheses were supported, the results of this study suggest that family communication patterns may have a significant influence on young people. The results appear to be in line with those reported in earlier studies using different sets of dependent measures of consumer behavior (Moore and Moschis 1978 and 1981; Moschis and Moore 1978 and 1979b; Moschis et al. 1983). Generally, the results across this limited number of studies suggest that pluralistics seem to be the most competent consumers at this particular age. This may be due to better training or earlier learning that can take place among these families. Protectives seem to develop patterns that are influenced by interpersonal relations (c.f. Moschis 1985), but such influences may only be confined to informal types. Consensuals appear to have patterns characterized by positive reaction toward marketing stimuli, while laissez-faires appear to be the least competent consumers.

Our study addressed general parent-child communication patterns, with little emphasis upon the specific parent (father, mother) and child (male, female) interaction. Future research should examine family communication patterns in such specific contexts). Further studies should also investigate different skills, attitudes, and behaviors, and they should replicate previous studies. Replication and accumulation of research findings in this area should help us better understand the important role of the family in the consumer socialization of young people.

#### Appendix

##### Family Communication Measures

The question designed to measure family communication patterns was the following:

Following is a list of things parents often say or do to their children. Read each statement carefully and check whether your own parents (or whomever you live with most of the time) say or do it very often, often, sometimes, rarely, or never.

Items used to measure socio-orientation were:

Your Parents ...

Tell you what things you should or shouldn't buy.  
Want to know what you do with your money.  
Complain when they don't like something you bought for yourself.  
Say that they know what is best for you and you shouldn't question them.  
Say you shouldn't ask questions about things that teenagers like you don't normally buy.  
Say you may not buy certain things.

Items used to measure concept-orientation were:

Your Parents ...

Ask you to help them buy things for the family.  
Ask you what you think about things they buy for themselves.  
Ask you for advice about buying things.  
Say you should decide what things you should or shouldn't buy.  
Say that buying things you like is important even if others do not like them.  
Say you should decide yourself how to spend your money.

Note: The sample was divided into "high" and "low" groups on each dimension by splitting each of the two summated scales at median, yielding the four-fold typology of FCP.

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