THE IMPACT OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION ON ADOLESCENT CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION

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Abstract

This study extends previous research on the communication processes in consumer socialization to include modeling, reinforcement and social interaction. Its purpose was to determine the relative importance of such learning mechanisms as well as ascertain the role of family communication in the development of consumer learning. The results suggest that different influence processes are used in the transmission of consumer cognitions and behavior from parent to child.

Introduction

Recently, consumer researchers have become interested in consumer socialization, especially the impact of interpersonal and mass communication on the development of consumer behavior. Much of the research has attempted to provide data useful in resolving issues of interest to public policy makers (Robertson, Rossiter and Gleason 1979). Considerably less attention has been devoted to the study and understanding of consumer socialization processes.

A recent conceptual model of consumer socialization (Moschis and Churchill 1978, Moschis and Moore 1978a and 1979) included five types of variables derived from general socialization theories: socialization agents, learning processes, social structural variables, age or life cycle and content of learning.

Socialization agent refers to a person or organization. In the life of every person there are a number of people and institutions (e.g., family members, school) directly involved in socialization who have influence because of their frequency of contact, primacy and control over rewards and punishments of the individual. Learning processes, the mechanisms through which the agent influences the learner, can be classified into modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Modeling, also known as observational learning, involves imitation of the agent's behavior. Reinforcement involves either reward (positive reinforcement) or punishment (negative reinforcement). Social interaction is less specific and may involve a combination of modeling and reinforcement; and it may include cognitive and overt communication between the agent and learner. Social structural variables are factors such as socioeconomic status, sex and birth order that help locate the learner within his/her social environment within which learning takes place. Age or life cycle position refers to the person's lifetime span during which learning occurs; it is used to index the person's cognitive development or life cycle stage(s). Finally, learning properties refer to a variety of consumer-related cognitions and behaviors that comprise the concept of consumer behavior such as formation and change in attitudes toward saving and spending, and brand preferences (For additional discussion of learning properties see Moschis and Churchill 1978, Moschis and Moore 1978a).

The relationships among these general types of variables are suggested by socialization theory and research. Social structural variables and age may be viewed as antecedent variables that may affect the development of consumer learning properties directly and indirectly through their impact on socialization processes. Socialization processes refer to specific agent-to-learner relationships and incorporate both the agent and the specific learning process affecting the acquisition of consumer learning properties.

Consumer socialization research is typically based upon two models of human learning: the social learning model and the cognitive development model. Studies using the social learning approach attempt to explain socialization as a function of environmental influences impinging on the person. Learning is assumed to be taking place during the individual's interaction with socialization agents in various social or structural settings. Previous consumer socialization studies, for example, examined the influence of family, television and peers on the development of patterns of consumer decision such as information seeking, buying motives and product evaluation (Moschis 1978, Moore and Stephens 1975, Churchill and Moschis 1979, Ward Wackman and Wartella 1977). The cognitive development model, on the other hand, seeks explanations for the formation of cognitions and behavior on the basis of qualitative changes (stages) in the cognitive organization between infancy and adulthood. These stages are defined in terms of cognitive structures the child can use in perceiving and dealing with the environment at different ages (Kohlberg 1969). Learning is viewed as a cognitive-psychological process of adjustment to one's environment. Recent consumer socialization studies, for example, have used the cognitive developmental approach to study some aspects of decision making among children and teenagers (Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977, Moschis and Churchill 1979).

Although the family is considered an important agent in consumer socialization, most of the research has treated family influence as a variable mediating media effects, especially television (Robertson 1979). Such research is very limited, although it suggests the family may be instrumental in teaching the child specific consumer attitudes and practices (Ward 1974). Unfortunately, little is known regarding the mechanism(s) through which such learning occurs.

This study attempts to address this area of consumer socialization by focusing upon three types of learning mechanisms--modeling, reinforcement and social interaction--and how these processes affect consumer socialization.

Conceptualizing Family Influence Processes

According to Ward, Wackman and Wartella (1977), parents influence the consumer socialization by (1) allowing children to observe and imitate their behaviors; (2) interacting with their children in consumption; and (3) providing opportunities for consumption, perhaps under parental guidance. Most of the consumer socialization research on parental influence has focused on interaction between child and parent, especially overt communication processes about consumption.

Socialization researchers usually classify agent-learner relationships into modeling, reinforcement or social interaction. Modeling involves imitations of the agent's behavior. Examples include agent-learner correlations of cognitions and behaviors. Reinforcement may be either positive (e.g., parental affection) or negative (e.g.,

psychological punishment) (McCandless 1969). Social interaction processes are less specific and may include both modeling and reinforcement (McLeod and O'Keefe 1972).

One aspect of social interaction, communication about consumption, can be defined in terms of Newcomb's (1953) A-B-X model and McLeod and Chaffee's (1972) typology of family communication patterns. McLeod and Chaffee, following Newcomb's paradigm, identify family communication patterns according to families in which only A-B relations are emphasized ("protective" families), A-X orientations are stressed ("pluralistic" families), A-B and A-X communication is promoted ("consensual" families) or neither A-B nor A-X parent-child communication occurs ("laissez-faire families).

Most consumer socialization research examining family influences has focused upon overt interaction processes (communication about consumption in particular) (Ward and Wackman 1971, Moschis and Moore 1979). Such studies have investigated how the quantity of such interactions affects consumption-related properties. These processes could be classified as social interaction mechanisms, according to McLeod and O'Keefe (1972), lacking any specific structure or pattern. A few studies have recently examined family communication structures and patterns in line with McLeod and Chaffee's (1972) typology (Moschis and Moore, 1978b and 1979; Moore and Moschis 1981) as well as modeling processes (Arndt 1971, Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977). Studies incorporating reinforcement processes are almost nonexistent.

This research attempts to provide data useful in answering two specific questions: (1) What is the relative importance of various learning mechanisms in consumer socialization? (2) Are family communication patterns important in consumer socialization?

Hypotheses

Earlier sociologists speculated that young people may learn "rational" aspects of consumption from parents (Riesman and Roseborough 1955, Parsons, Bales and Shils 1953). Ward and his colleagues (1977) found that mothers have consumer goals for their children including positive consumer behaviors but great variation in the way they go about teaching such goals to their children. Although most consumer socialization research has focused on the effects of parent-child (social) interaction on consumption, Ward and his associates (1977) suggest that such learning may also occur through modeling and reinforcement processes. Furthermore, previous research suggests that such learning processes may vary by social class, age, sex and race of the child (Ward 1974, Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977, Moschis 1981).

Previous research indicates that a family communication environment stressing A-X (concept) orientations stimulates greater competence than an environment stressing A-B (social) orientations. Furthermore, because of the absence of social constraints, pluralistic children tend to be more competent than children from consensual homes. Specifically, pluralistic children were found to have greater political, and consumer affairs knowledge, and to engage in more positive consumer activities than adolescents from other types of family communication environments (McLeod and Chaffee 1972, Moschis and Moore 1978b).

On the basis of these findings it is expected that (1) modeling, reinforcement (positive and negative), frequency of communication about consumption and pluralistic FCP will be related to positive consumer-related cognitions, attitudes and behavior; and (2) the impact of these processes on the acquisition of consumption-related cognitions will vary by age, sex, race, and SES; (3) the addition of family communication patterns to traditionally used measures of family interactions provides better explanation of family influence processes over and above explanations provided by simple measures of frequency of interaction.

The Study

Data were gathered through self-administered questionnaires completed in the classroom during regular class hours by 734 adolescents in a Southern state. While not randomly selected, respondents were demographically representative of the area, including sex (49% males and 51% females), age (53% middle schoolers and 47% high schoolers), race (11% blacks and 88% whites) and socioeconomic status measured on Duncan's (1961) scale (mean=45.3). Respondents were in twelve schools located in six different counties.

Measurement of Variables

Family Communication Patterns. The traditional items for measuring the two general parent-child communication structures were revised to include communication directly related to consumer matters, with responses measured on a five-point "very often to never" scale.

The revised items measuring the socio-oriented dimension were:

(Parents) tell (child) what things he should or shouldn't buy.

(Parents) want to know what (child) does with his money.

(Parents) complain when they do not like something (child) bought for himself.

(Parents) say they know what is best for (child) and he shouldn't question them.

(Parents) say (child) shouldn't ask questions about things teenagers do not usually buy.

(Parents) say (child) may not buy certain things.

The revised items for the concept-oriented dimension were:

(Parents) ask (child) to help them buy things for the family.

(Parents) ask (child) what (child) thinks about things they buy for themselves.

(Parents) say (child) should decide about things (child) should or shouldn't buy.

(Parents) say that buying things (child) likes is important even if others don't like them.

(Parents) say (child) should decide himself how to spend his money.

(Parents) ask (child) for advice about buying things.

Most of the revised items were validated in a previous consumer socialization study, which compared the new measures to previous items based on internal consistency (coefficient alpha). Factor analysis was performed for internal validation purposes. Using varimax rotation (principal components analysis), two factors were extracted. All the items designed to measure each dimension of family communication structure loaded on the hypothesized dimension, provided evidence of internal validity.

Reliability and validity checks were also performed for the present study. The alpha coefficients of reliability were .71 and .54, respectively, above the minimum recommended level of .50 (Nunnally, 1967). "High" and "low" groups on each dimension were constructed by splitting each of the two scales at the median, yielding the usual fourfold typology. External validation for the revised items was also performed in the same study by correlating each family communication pattern with media use variables. Specifically, amounts and specific types of media used by family communication patterns were consistent with previous studies (Moschis and Moore 1978b, Moore and Moschis 1981).

Family communication about consumption is operationally defined as overt interaction between parent and adolescent concerning goods and services (Ward and Wackman, 1971); it was measured by summing responses to six items. A typical item was "My parents and I talk about buying things," with responses measured on a five-point "very" (=5) to "never" (=1) scale. The reliability coefficient of the scale was .56.

In addition, two types of measures were used to tap the adolescent's learning from parents. Modeling was measured by asking the respondent to state whether he observed his parents perform ten general types of consumer behavior (e.g., shop around, compare brands and prices) and summed across to form a zero to ten-point scale, with a reliability coefficient of .52.

Our measures of reinforcement, both positive and negative, were in line with previous theoretical perspectives (e.g., McCandless 1969) and with those measures used in previous studies of television violence and adolescent aggressiveness studies (e.g., Chaffee and McLeod 1972a and 1972b; McLeod, Atkin and Chaffee 1972a and 1972b). In line with the common operational definitions of negative reinforcement used in socialization studies (cf. McLeod and O'Keefe 1972), parental punishment referred to physical, verbal and restrictive behaviors. Examples of items used were: "My parents punish me by taking away my allowance," "My parents make me feel guilty about some things I buy," and " My parents punish me by saying they won't buy me things they promised me." The measure of positive reinforcement, in line with previous research, incorporated parental affection items such as "My parents buy me presents," and "My parents give me money to buy things I want." Responses to two sets of six items (each set measuring one aspect of reinforcement) were measured on a one to five-point "very often-never" scale, and were summed across each set to form six to thirty-point scales with reliability coefficients of .70 and .58, respectively.

Criterion Variables

Three measures of positive consumer behaviors were used in line with previous research: consumer affairs knowledge, consumer activity, and consumer role perceptions (e.g., Moschis and Moore 1978a, Moore and Moschis 1981, Moschis and Churchill 1978).

Consumer affairs knowledge refers to the accuracy of knowledge of basic consumer concepts as well as major consumer legislation. This variable was measured by summing correct responses to eleven "true--false--don't know" items such as: "The mortgage is the down payment of a house" and "Milk sold in the store must show the last day it can be sold." The alpha reliability coefficient was .48.

Consumer activity refers to the ability to buy and use products and services in a rational and efficient way. It was measured by summing responses to ten items measured on a five-point, "Very often--Never" scale. Typical items were "I plan how to spend my money," "I carefully read most of the things they write on packages or labels," and "I compare prices and brands before buying something that costs a lot of money." The index could range from 10 to 50; its reliability as measured by coefficient alpha was .66.

Because consumer role perceptions include formalized expectations associated with the given social role (Shaw and Constazo 1970), the term refers to the accuracy of the individual's cognitions and perceptions of goods (e.g., "check warranties and guarantees before buying," "Buy returnable bottles instead of throwaway ones") when they start work and raise a family. Responses were scored on a five-point "definitely would do" to "definitely wouldn't do" scale. High scores represent "positive" consumer behaviors. The reliability coefficient of this scale was .68. Factor analysis revealed that consumer role perceptions and consumer activity were two different dimensions.

Results

Family Influences

The first consideration in analyzing the data was the extent to which various learning processes (social interaction, modeling, and reinforcement--positive and negative) are associated with the development of rational consumer orientations. Table 1 outlines the relationship between family communication measures and the consumer-related properties.

Overt parent-child communication about consumption was weakly associated with consumer knowledge but it was significantly related to consumer role perception ($r = .16$, $p < .01$) and consumer activity ($r = .23$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that parents may encourage their child to perform various positive consumer activities without explaining "why."

Observational learning was strongly related to the child's perceptions of consumer-related norms ($r = .40$, $p < .001$) and, to a lesser extent, to consumer activity ($r = .14$, $p < .01$). These findings provide some support for the notion that in attempting to teach them consumer norms, parents expect their children to acquire such knowledge from them by observing their consumer behaviors.

Positive reinforcement was weakly related to consumer role perceptions ($r = .09$, $p < .05$) but strongly related to consumer activity ($r = .21$, $p < .001$), suggesting that such a mechanism may encourage the performance of positive activities. Negative reinforcement may not necessarily discourage such activities, although there was a slight indication of this ($r = -.03$, n.s.); it may, however, constrain the development of consumer knowledge ($r = .07$, $p < .05$).

The Effects of Antecedent Variables

The first consideration in analyzing the effects of antecedent variables was to assess their impact on family interaction processes. Table 2 shows relationships among independent variables. The data show that with increasing age, teenagers tend to overtly interact less with their parents about consumption matters and to receive less positive reinforcement from them. Blacks are less likely to observe their parent's consumer behavior. Males are less likely than females to communicate overtly with their parents about consumption and less likely to receive

positive reinforcement and more likely to receive negative reinforcement. No SES differences on learning processes emerged.

In examining direct effects of social structural and developmental variables, we found several significant relationships. These are shown in Table 3 along with measures of family influence, in the form of standardized regression coefficients (betas).

Age is a strong predictor of consumer knowledge, and blacks are less likelty to be as knowledgeable about consumer matters but more likely to perform positive consumer activities than their white counterparts. Males tend to be more knowledgeable about consumer matters than females. These antecedent and family influence variables accounted for nine to nineteen percent of the variance in criterion variables.

These results further suggest that adolescents' acquisition of consumer knowledge may be a developmental phenomenon, acquired via experiences with the marketplace or other agents (e.g., peer interaction) as the child matures. Adolescents also appear to develop norms regarding consumer behavior by observing their parents. The extent to which such norms materialize into positive consumer behavior may depend to some extent upon parental mediation such as reinforcement and purposive training. Thus, different learning processes appear to be associated with the acquisition of different learning properties, with antecedent variables affecting such development both indirectly (by impacting on learning processes) as well as directly.

Effects of Family Communication Patterns

The final concern in this research was the extent to which family communication patterns add to the explanation of family influence processes over and above what can be accounted for by the three traditional measures of learning processes. Table 4 shows relationships between the criterion variables and all independent variables. Entries are standardized regression coefficients, derived from regression models which include all measures. By comparing these results with those in Table 3, the contribution of these FCP measures can be assessed.

First, with respect to the power of the additional measures of family communication patterns, the R^2 values in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that these measures of communication "patterns" add relatively little to the variance already accounted for by frequency measures of family influence. The incremental increase for the R^2 is two percent for consumer knowledge, one percent for consumer role perceptions and about four percent for consumer activity. In addition, the beta weights of family influence variables in Tables 3 and 4 suggest positive intercorrelations among "frequency" and "pattern" measures. The results of relationships between independent measures of family influences are shown in Table 5.

The results of Table 5 suggest that "pluralistic" families are more likely to use positive reinforcement and less likely to use negative reinforcement mechanisms than their counterparts. Parents in consensual families, on the other hand, are likely to use both types of reinforcement mechanisms as well as engage in overt discussion of consumption with their children. Protective parents are more likely to use negative reinforcement, and less likely to use positive reinforcement than their counterparts. Finally, in laissez-faire families there appears to be little family influence taking place as compared to other types of families. These findings are fairly consistent with the results of other studies in various disciplines (McLeod and Chaffee 1972).

Summary

This study examined the effects of family influence processes on adolescent consumer socialization. The results suggest that different influence processes (learning mechanisms) may be used in the transmission of consumer cognitions and behaviors from parent to child. Parents, in general, appear to make limited attempts to teach their children communication skills. Such efforts seem to focus upon the desirability of performing certain acts (behaviors), but provide little education or understanding (cognitions). Cognitions appear to be acquired from parents (especially consumer behavior norms) through observation, suggesting that parents may try to act as role models to their children and then expect them to learn such roles through observation. It is not clear, however, from these data whether parents make a conscious effort to establish such roles, since parents' responses were not analyzed.

The effects of antecedent variables also seem to be significant. Such impact may be both direct by affecting criterion variables, as well as indirect by affecting socialization practices within the family. These data suggest there may be subcultural influences on family socialization processes, beyond the direct effect of variables.

Finally, the desirability or usefulness of incorporating both frequency and pattern measures of learning processes was examined. The incremental increase in the variance accounted for by family communication patterns (added as a block), although "statistically significant," added relatively little to the explained variances in the level of cognitive skills. For consumer activity, however, the explanation was greater, suggesting that such measures of family communication patterns may be important variables in certain situations, and highlighting the complex role of the family in the adolescent's consumer socialization.

Overall, the findings suggest the role of family communication in consumer socialization is rather complex because, unlike most areas of communication (e.g., religion, politics and sex) consumer behavior seems more amenable to learning through observation. Future research in the area of consumer socialization assessing the role of family should consider incorporating both the frequency and quality of communication between parent and child. It should also examine a broader range of dependent variables to more accurately assess the role of family in the development of consumer behavior.

TABLE 1
Relationships Between Selected
Criterion Variables and Family Influence Measures[a]

	Consumer Knowledge	Consumer Role Perceptions	Consumer Activity
Overt Communication: Consumption	-.04	.16	.23
Observation of Parental Behaviors	.07	.40	.14
Positive Reinforcement	-.03	.09	.21
Negative Reinforcement	-.07	.02	-.03

[a]Table entries are product-moment correlation coefficients. Correlations of approximately .08 and greater are significant at beyond the .05 level.

TABLE 2
Correlation Matrix for Independent Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overt Communication							
2. Observation	.19*						
3. Positive Reinforcement	.40*	.03					
4. Negative Reinforcement	.16*	-.00	-.11*				
5. Age	-.15*	-.07	-.09*	-.05			
6. Race	-.01	-.19*	.05	.08*	.11*		
7. SES	-.00	.04	.01	-.05	.03	-.17*	
8. Sex	.16*	-.02	.12*	-.13*	.01	-.03	-.03

Asterisk (*) denotes correlation coefficient significant at beyond .05 level.

TABLE 3
Relationships Between Criterion Variables and Selected Independent Measures

	Consumer Knowledge	Consumer Role Perceptions	Consumer Activity
Family Influences			
Overt Communication	.02	.06	.16*
Observation	.06	.39*	.11*
Positive Reinforcement	.01	.05	-.13*
Negative Reinforcement	-.08*	.02	-.05
Antecedents			
Age	.38*	.00	-.03
Race	-.14*	.02	.08*
SES	.07*	.02	.03
Sex	-.10*	.02	-.02
R^2	.18*	.17*	.09*

Asterick (*) denotes statistical coefficient significance at beyond .05 level.

TABLE 4
Relationships Between Criterion Variables and Independent Measures

	Consumer Knowledge	Consumer Role Perceptions	Consumer Activity
Family Influences			
Overt Communication	.02	.04	.12*
Observation	.05	.39*	.10*
Positive Reinforcement	-.02	.05	.06
Negative Reinforcement	-.06	.02	-.07
Pluralistic-FCP	.02	.09*	-.03
Protective-FCP	-.08*	.06	-.21*
Laissez-Faire-FCP	-.14*	.01	-.22*
Consensual-FCP	-.10*	.11*	-.02
Antecedents			
Age	.38*	.00	-.03
Race	-.14*	.02	.07
SES	.07	.02	.04
Sex	-.12*	.01	-.04
R^2	.20*	.18*	.13*

Asterick (*) denotes statistical significance at beyond .05 level.

TABLE 5
Correlation Matrix for Measures of Family Influence Processes[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overt Communication							
2. Observation	.19						
3. Positive Reinforcement	.40	.03					
4. Negative Reinforcement	.16	-.00	-.11				
5. FCP-Pluralistic	.02	.03	.20	-.26			
6. FCP-Protective	-.07	.04	-.18	.12	-.30		
7. FCP-Laissez-Faire	-.30	-.11	-.24	-.19	-.34	-.29	
8. Consensual	.15	.02	.20	.32	-.33	-.28	-.32

[a]Table entries are product-moment correlation coefficients. Correlations of approximately .08 and greater are significant at beyond the .05 level.

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