

## **Purchasing Patterns of Adolescent Consumers\***

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*This study examined purchasing role structures for several types of products consumed by adolescents. Variations in purchasing role structures were found by type of product, social class, sex, and age of adolescent consumers. Marketing implications of the study findings are discussed.*

Several writers have emphasized the importance of the youth market to marketers and retailers.<sup>1</sup> Young people comprise a large specialized market for several products and exert great influence on family buying decisions. Accurate appraisals of the annual youth market are difficult, but one tally estimated it at \$3.5 billion discretionary income, \$45 billion actual spending, and \$145 billion influential spending (purchases in which youth played an influential role).<sup>2</sup>

\*The data reported in this article were collected as part of a multistate study of adolescent consumer socialization partly supported by a doctoral research grant to the senior author from the American Marketing Association. At the time of the study the authors were, respectively, Ph.D. candidate in marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Visiting Assistant Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina, and Director of the Communication Research Center at the University of North Dakota.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, James U. McNeal, *An Introduction to Consumer Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973); Eugene Gilbert, *Advertising and Marketing to Young People* (New York: Printers' Ink Books, 1957); James F. Engel, David T. Kollat, and Roger D. Blackwell, *Consumer Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973).

<sup>2</sup> "Getting Across the Youth," *Business Week*, 2094: 89, 1969.

While some research has recently been focused on the consumer behavior of young people and their role in family purchase decisions,<sup>3</sup> little research has been devoted to the study of purchasing role structures, i.e., individuals involved in the physical act of purchasing, for products used by youth. Because those individuals purchasing the products have some influence on such decisions as to what products and brands to buy and where to buy, knowledge about purchasing role structures for products of young people's use can have significant implications for retailing and marketing strategy formulation. As Engel and his colleagues put it:

Purchasing role structures affect almost every element of the retailing mix. Physical facilities, particularly store interiors . . . decisions concerning hours of operation . . . the choice of advertising media, and location within the medium . . . other elements of the retailing mix—merchandise variety and assortment, point of purchase, display strategy, and pricing decisions—might also be affected by purchasing role structures.<sup>4</sup>

Purchasing role structures also affect every variable in the manufacturer's marketing mix such as the functional, esthetic, and symbolic aspects of product design, media selection, and channel strategy.<sup>5</sup>

The study reported in this article is concerned with the purchasing role structures for several types of products consumed by adolescents. Because information on individual(s) participating in the purchase of a given product can be most useful to marketers in the context of the purchaser(s)' demographic, socioeconomic, and other characteristics,<sup>6</sup> this study analyzes purchasing role structures by type of product as well as by social class, sex, and age of the adolescent consumer.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Roy L. Moore and Lowndes F. Stephens, "Some Communication and Demographic Determinants of Adolescent Consumer Learning," *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 2 (September 1975), 80-92; Paul Gilkison, "Teenagers Perceptions of Buying Frame of Reference: A Decade of Retrospect," *Journal of Retailing*, 49, No. 2 (Summer 1973), 25-37; Lewis A. Berey and Richard W. Pollay, "The Influencing Role of the Child in Family Decision Making," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 5 (February 1968), 70-72.

<sup>4</sup> Engel, et al., *Consumer Behavior*, p. 468.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 468-69.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 467-68.

## METHODOLOGY

Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 607 adolescents in middle schools (sixth, seventh, and eighth, grades) and high schools (ninth through twelfth grades) in Kentucky and North Carolina during the winter of 1975. In general, respondents were evenly divided between males and females in each sample. The questionnaire was completed by 205 middle school students and 402 high school students. Although logistics prevented random selection of subjects, comparisons of 1970 census figures with respondent socioeconomic sample means (using Duncan's two-digit-percentile SES index) indicated that from a socioeconomic point of view, the subjects were a fair representation of the youth in each region. The mean Duncan SES for the total sample was 50.2 based on the father's occupation.

With respect to other adolescent buying characteristics, the shopping habits of the sample were also fairly representative of those of the average American youth. For example, the average weekly dollar expenditure for adolescents (12 to 18 years old) in our sample was \$9.95 as compared to an average of \$10.88 for the average high school student (14 to 17 years old) according to the 1974 Rand Youth Poll.<sup>7</sup>

Purchasing role structures were determined by asking respondents to indicate how they usually buy 11 different items. Response alternatives were "I buy them alone," "I buy them with friends," "I buy them with parents or brother or sister," "someone else buys them without me," "it varies (sometimes one person sometimes another)," and "I don't use." The eleven items were (1) school supplies, (2) snacks such as candy, cokes and chips, (3) shoes, (4) records or tapes, (5) shirts and jeans, (6) socks and underwear, (7) coats, (8) film for the camera, (9) sports equipment such as tennis rackets, baseballs, or footballs, (10) movie tickets, and (11) health care products such as shampoo, vitamins, and deodorant. For the purpose of the present analysis, these items were roughly divided into three categories—convenience, shopping, and specialty goods—on the basis of their relevance to adolescents' consumption habits.

<sup>7</sup> Ned Scharff, "U.S. Teens Spend More Than Ever," *Washington Star, Wisconsin State Journal*, December 18, 1975, Section 5, p. 1.

### VARIATIONS BY TYPE OF PRODUCT

Table I shows the percentage distribution of responses for the total sample. Since our main interest was in examining how major types of purchasing role structures—independent from and dependent on family members<sup>8</sup>—vary by type of product, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the adolescent consumer, we combined the first two categories (“Buy Alone” and “Buy With Friends”) shown in Table I into one group and the next two categories (“Buy With Family Members” and “Others Buy for Me”) into another group labeling them “independent purchasing” and “dependent purchasing,” respectively. (The remaining categories shown in the last two columns of Table I were omitted.)

The first concern of this study was the extent to which purchasing role structures vary among different types of products. Previous research on purchasing role structures for various types of household products showed that the degree of husband-wife participation in purchasing is positively related to the price and technical complexity of the product.<sup>9</sup> These findings suggest that similar product characteristics may also affect the degree of family-member participation in purchasing the selected products used by the adolescent consumer.

The data in Table I indicate that purchasing role structures vary significantly across the selected items that are likely to be consumed by adolescents. The data further suggest that adolescents’ shopping goods (clothing) tend to be purchased jointly by the adolescent consumer and family members, whereas purchases of adolescent specialty goods (records or tapes, sporting equipment, and movie tickets) tend to be purchased without family members. Within the shopping goods category, the extent of adolescent-family member involvement in purchasing appears to be related to the social visibility and price of the product. These findings suggest that the degree of adolescent-family member involvement in purchasing may be a function of the socioeconomic risk present in a purchasing situation.

<sup>8</sup> George Psathas, “Ethnicity, Social Class and Adolescence Independence from Parental Control,” *American Sociological Review*, 22 (August 1957), 415-23.

<sup>9</sup> *A Pilot Study of the Roles of Husbands and Wives in Purchasing Decisions, Parts I-X* (New York: L. Jaffe Associates, Inc., 1965); Elizabeth Wolgast, “Do Husbands or Wives Make Purchasing Decisions?” *Journal of Marketing*, 23 (October 1958), 151-58.

TABLE I

*Purchasing Role Structures for Selected Products Consumed by Adolescents (N = 607)*

							<i>Adolescent Consumers</i>	
Product	Buy Alone (Percent)	Buy With Friends (Percent)	Buy Family Members (Percent)	Others Buy For Me (Percent)	It Varies (Percent)	Not Used (Percent)	Total	
<b>Convenience Goods</b>								
Snack foods	43.0	26.0	13.2	3.5	11.3	3.0	100.0	
Health care products	24.9	2.4	39.2	25.0	5.2	3.3	100.0	
Camera film	36.6	5.5	23.2	9.4	4.5	20.8	100.0	
School supplies	43.5	7.7	29.0	9.0	10.1	.5	99.8*	
Average	37.0	10.4	26.1	11.7	7.7	7.1	100.0	
<b>Shopping Goods</b>								
Shoes	21.7	5.1	63.7	4.4	4.6	.5	100.0	
Shirts and jeans	26.4	7.6	53.1	6.3	6.1	.4	99.9*	
Socks and underwear	30.1	3.3	45.9	15.6	4.2	.9	100.0	
Coats	12.9	4.2	70.1	8.9	3.3	.5	99.9*	
Average	22.8	5.0	58.2	8.8	4.5	.6	100.0	
<b>Specialty Goods</b>								
Records or tapes	51.0	17.8	14.7	3.3	6.1	7.1	100.0	
Sports equipment	36.8	10.5	26.3	4.6	6.2	15.6	100.0	
Movie tickets	44.5	27.9	7.6	3.9	11.6	4.4	99.9*	
Average	44.1	18.7	16.2	4.0	8.0	9.0	100.0	
AVERAGE TOTAL	33.7	10.7	35.2	8.5	6.7	5.2	100.0	

\* Percentages do not sum up to 100.0 because of rounding-off calculations.

Cochran's Q = 681.91, with 10 df significant beyond the .001 level.

Note: Cochran's Q analysis applies to binomial distribution of responses to the two major types of purchasing role structures—"independent from family members" ("Buy alone" and "Buy with friends") and "Dependent on family members" ("Buy with family members" and "Others buy for me").

Some variations were also found in the purchasing role structures of adolescent convenience type of goods. Generally, adolescent consumers seem to have considerably more family independence in the purchase of snack foods, camera film, and school supplies than in the purchase of health care items.

### SOCIOECONOMIC, SEX, AND AGE DIFFERENCES

A second consideration in analyzing the two main types of purchasing role structures was to determine the extent to which adolescent independence in purchasing varies by social class. Previous research suggests that upper- and middle-class families, as opposed to lower-class families, are more conscious of the normative standards of their class and they are more likely to closely supervise their children's activities (including clothes buying) in an effort to socialize them into the class norms.<sup>10</sup> Thus we reasoned that lower-class adolescents would have greater independence in purchasing than middle- and upper-class adolescents.

The data in Table II show significant negative relationships between social class and degree of adolescent independence for purchases of health care items, shoes, coats, and sports equipment. This tendency toward greater involvement by members of upper-class families in purchases of these types of products may indeed reflect their desire for their child's competence, social acceptance, and well-being,<sup>11</sup> since no significant relationship was found between the adolescent's social class and available spending money.

Another consideration in this study was the extent to which purchasing role structures vary by sex of the adolescent consumer. Because previous studies found female adolescents to be more susceptible to peer influence than males for products important to overall personal appearance and that they would not buy clothes that peers did not approve,<sup>12</sup> we expected this group conformity to be reflected in their purchasing patterns through greater family

<sup>10</sup> Psathas, "Ethnicity, Social Class and Adolescence Independence from Parental Control."

<sup>11</sup> Engel, *et al.*, *Consumer Behavior*, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Kenneth C. Cannon, Ruth Staples, and Irene Carlson, "Personal Appearance as a Factor in Personal Acceptance," *Journal of Home Economics*, 44 (November 1952), 710-13; Josephine R. Saunders, A. Coskum Salmi, and Enid F. Tazier, "Congruence and Conflict in Buying Decisions of Mothers and Daughters," *Journal of Retailing*, 49, No. 3 (Fall 1973), 3-18.

TABLE II

*Adolescent Independence in Purchase of Selected Products by Social Class*

Product	Lower Percent*	Middle Percent*	Upper Percent*	(p†)
Convenience Goods				
Snack foods	79	80	83	.63
Health care	33	36	19	.00
Camera film	53	55	62	.32
School supplies	60	57	56	.75
Shopping Goods				
Shoes	30	32	21	.05
Shirts and jeans	39	38	32	.39
Socks and underwear	38	36	32	.54
Coats	23	21	9	.00
Specialty Goods				
Records or tapes	80	78	80	.92
Sports equipment	61	67	50	.01
Movie tickets	86	85	89	.51

\* Figures refer to percentages of adolescents who usually purchase items in the absence of family members, i.e., "alone" or "with friends." ("It varies" and "don't use" categories are excluded from percentages.)

† The probability estimate is the result of chi-square analysis of the frequency distributions for the three groups.

independence in purchasing products relevant to physical appearance.

The data in Table III appear to partly confirm our expectations, showing that females have significantly greater family independence than males in purchasing only health-care items, and shirts and jeans; no significant sex differences were found for other products relevant to physical appearance (shoes and coats). Males, on the other hand, appear to have significantly greater family independence than females in purchasing sports equipment.

Although it was expected that there would be significant differ-

TABLE III

*Adolescent Independence in Purchase of Selected Products by Sex*

Product	Male Percent*	Female Percent*	(p†)
Convenience Goods			
Snack foods	84	76	.07
Health care	25	37	.01
Camera film	60	52	.12
School supplies	55	61	.15
Shopping Goods			
Shoes	31	24	.13
Shirts and jeans	30	46	.00
Socks and underwear	34	37	.48
Coats	20	15	.18
Specialty Goods			
Records or tapes	78	81	.42
Sports equipment	67	50	.00
Movie tickets	86	86	.92

\* Figures refer to percentages of adolescents who usually purchase items in the absence of family members, i.e., "alone" or "with friends." ("It varies" and "don't use" categories are excluded from percentages.)

† The probability estimate is the result of chi-square analysis of the frequency distributions for the two groups.

ences in the degree of purchasing independence between younger and older adolescents for all types of products<sup>13</sup>—and these differences were found (Table IV)—the main interest was in determining whether social class was a significant factor affecting the extent to

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, C. A. Millson, *Conformity to Peers Versus Adults in Early Adolescence* (New York: Doctoral Thesis, Cornell University, 1966); Dorothy Dickins and Virginia Ferguson, *Practices and Attitudes of Rural White Children and Parents Concerning Money* (State College, Miss.: State University Technical Bull. No. 43, Agricultural Expt. Sta., 1957).



TABLE IV

*Adolescent Independence in Purchase of Selected Products by Age*

Product	Younger Percent*	Older Percent*	(p†)
Convenience Goods			
Snack foods	73	85	.00
Health care	73	85	.01
Camera film	46	62	.00
School supplies	45	64	.00
Shopping Goods			
Shoes	16	35	.00
Shirts and jeans	18	46	.00
Socks and underwear	22	42	.00
Coats	11	21	.00
Specialty Goods			
Records or tapes	66	86	.00
Sports equipment	52	65	.01
Movie tickets	80	90	.00

\* Figures refer to percentages of adolescents who usually purchase items in the absence of family members, i.e., "alone" or "with friends." ("It varies" and "don't use" categories are excluded from percentages.)

† The probability estimate is the result of chi-square analysis of the frequency distributions for the two groups.

which adolescents attain family independence in purchasing with age. In analyzing age differences in purchasing independence, a curvilinear relationship was found between social class and the extent to which older adolescent consumers had greater independence in purchasing than younger adolescents. Lower-class adolescent consumers appear to acquire greater independence from family members in purchasing activities with age than adolescent consumers in other social classes. Specifically, these data show that lower-class older adolescents had significantly ( $p < .05$ ) greater independence in shopping than lower-class younger adolescents for all types of products except health-care items, shoes, and film.

Significant differences in purchasing independence among younger and older adolescents were also found for upper-class adolescent consumers, but only for the purchase of six of the eleven types of products (health care, school supplies, shoes, shirts and jeans, socks and underwear, and records or tapes). Middle-class adolescents appear to attain relatively *less* independence in purchasing as they grow older than do adolescent consumers in the other two social classes. Significant differences in purchasing independence ( $p < .05$ ) between middle-class younger and older adolescents were found only for three of the eleven types of products examined (camera film, shoes, shirts, and jeans). Thus, the curvilinear relationship between social class and joint husband-wife decision-making and shopping found in previous studies<sup>14</sup> seems to exist in joint adolescent-family member purchasing habits concerning products of adolescents' use.

### SUMMARY

Variations in purchasing role structures for selected adolescent consumer products were found by type of product, social class, sex and age of adolescent consumers. Adolescents appear to have considerable freedom in purchasing products relevant to their own recreation, but they tend to depend on adult family members when purchasing items of high price and social risk. This dependence—most noticeable in upper classes of society—may reflect parental concern over their children's well being, competence, and social acceptance. Significant sex differences also were found in purchasing role structures for health-care items, sports equipment, and selected clothing items. Finally, the extent of adolescent-family involvement in purchasing varied with age. Younger consumers had greater purchasing independence than older consumers. This was found to be particularly true for lower-class adolescents. For upper- and especially middle-class families the degree of adolescent independence in purchasing did not increase significantly with age for most types of products investigated.

### IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several implications for retailers and

<sup>14</sup> See Engel, *et al.*, *Consumer Behavior*, p. 199.

*(Continued on page 92)*

### Adolescent Consumers

*(Continued from page 26)*

manufacturers of adolescent consumer goods. *Retailers* of shopping goods similar to those examined in this study should operate during hours that are most convenient for young consumers and adult members of the family to shop together and they should have physical facilities acceptable to both age groups. Retail facilities having youth departments that are likely to be patronized by upper- and middle-class families should try to appeal to both parents and youth more than outlets which are likely to be patronized by lower social class individuals. Stores patronized by lower social class customers should focus greater effort on appealing to these young customers. In-store shelf arrangements and location of products young consumers tend to purchase independently (e.g., snack foods, school supplies, and camera film), as well as related items, should be at eye level and convenient for the young shoppers to see and reach.

*Manufacturers* of shopping good items for adolescent consumption should distribute their products through retail facilities that are compatible to both adolescents and adult consumers. For shopping goods, marketing communications should attempt to reach adolescent consumers and adult family members simultaneously, particularly when the communicator wants to appeal to upper- and middle-class adolescents. Advertising in the media should emphasize the social significance of the product and group conformity to a greater extent for shopping goods and for adolescents in upper social classes than to any other types of goods or social classes. Finally, for recreational products similar to those examined in the study, the adolescent audience should be reached through specialized media that is tailored to their media-use habits.

### Market Segmentation

*(Continued from page 34)*

Furthermore, while the heavier users are quite satisfied with the restaurant on the "intimate/social" dimension (data show they like its relatively social atmosphere), the light users and triers are dissatisfied (they would prefer a more intimate atmosphere). In other words, a move toward satisfying one segment is likely to reduce the satisfaction of others.

