

Theoretical article

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND VALUES FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract:

This comprehensive review examines the scholarly evolution of the consumer behaviour of children within 55 years from 1950 to 2005. This is done by surveying works on brand loyalty and conspicuous consumption within these years through which we can establish consumer socialization. The synthesis spans three developmental stages—perceptual, analytical, and reflective—integrating theoretical perspectives from cognitive and social psychology. Key findings are explored, encompassing advertising effects, product and brand knowledge, shopping skills, decision-making abilities, purchase influence, and consumption motives. The review identifies gaps in current understanding, emphasizing challenges for future research in areas such as (i) advertising and persuasion knowledge, (ii) product and brand knowledge, (iii) shopping skills, (iv) decision-making skills, (v) purchase influence and negotiation strategies and (iv) consumption motives and values. Methodological challenges are disused including sample design, stimuli selection, and the design of measurements. This urges researchers to address these complexities for a nuanced understanding of consumer socialization. Despite challenges, the review underscores the critical importance of advancing research in this field, offering a promising avenue for deeper insights into the evolving landscape of children's consumer socialization.

Key words: Perceptual Stage, Analytical Stage, Reflective Stage

1. Introduction

Scholarly exploration of children's consumer behavior has roots in the 1950s. This includes the seminal works on brand loyalty (Guest, 1955) and conspicuous consumption (Reisman & Roseborough, 1955). Subsequent advancements in the 1960s broadened the scope to encompass children's comprehension of marketing, parental influence, and the interplay of parents and peers in consumption decisions. The 1970s witnessed heightened scrutiny, driven by criticisms of advertising to young children from groups like Action for Children's Television and government bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission, culminating in the establishment of the field of consumer socialization.

Over the following three decades, a substantial body of research has explored diverse aspects of children's consumer behaviour such as socialization, covering goods, products, attractive brand names that will increase social reputation, advertising and its impact, pricing and best bargains, decision-making strategies, influence from parents/guardians, and consumption motives. The focus on advertising effects ranged from features that make children's advertising persuasive to cumulative effects on values and consumption patterns. There are also some undesirable effects of marketing, such as underage drinking and unhealthy diets that lead to overweighting, obesity and increase of sugar-level and garnered attention.

This chapter synthesizes findings from 1950 to 2005, providing a unified narrative on consumer socialization from childhood to adolescence. Emphasizing age-related developments, the conceptual framework acknowledges the social context's importance, including family, friends, ads, social and mass media, and the marketing profile. The discussion draws on research from consumer behavior and marketing journals, excluding studies on specific product consumptions and those outside consumer socialization. The first part offers a conceptual overview, integrating theoretical views on cognitive and social development. The second part reviews research across perceptual, analytical, and reflective stages of consumer socialization, exploring children's knowledge across various domains. The chapter concludes by outlining challenges for future research in addressing these stages.

Theoretical underpinnings include Piaget's cognitive development stages and information processing theories. Social development aspects, such as social perspective taking and impression formation, are contextualized within frameworks proposed by Selman (1980) and Barenboim (1981). This synthesis aims to characterize children's evolving knowledge, skills, and reasoning, providing a comprehensive understanding of consumer socialization.

2. Stages of Consumer Socialization

Consumer socialization, the process through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and values as consumers, is intricately woven into the cognitive and social development of individuals from birth to adolescence. This developmental journey can be understood through a series of successive stages, drawing on renowned frameworks in cognitive and social psychology.

2.1 Cognitive Development: Piaget's Theory

- a) Sensorimotor (Birth to 2 years): Characterized by perceptual-boundness and a focus on observable aspects.
- b) Preoperational (2 to 7 years): Transition from perceptual to symbolic thought; centration on single dimensions.
- c) Concrete Operational (7 to 11 years): Improved ability to consider multiple dimensions and think more abstractly.
- d) Formal Operational (11 through adulthood): Transition to adult-like thought patterns and complex hypothetical reasoning (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1988).

The information processing theories covers the complement Piaget's stages, categorizing children as strategic, cued or limited processors based on their information processing skills (Roedder, 1981).

2.2 Social Development: Social Perspective Taking and Impression Formation

- e) Social Perspective Taking: Progression from egocentrism (ages 3–6) to mutual role-taking (ages 10–12) and understanding others' perspectives in social contexts (Selman, 1980).
- f) Impression Formation: Evolution from concrete descriptions (before age 6) to abstract attributions and comparisons (after age 12) (Barenboim, 1981).

2.3 Stages of Consumer Socialization: A Three-Stage Framework

1. **Perceptual Stage (Ages 3–7):** Emphasis on immediate perceptual features, perceptually-bound knowledge, and egocentric decision-making. Limited adaptivity in influence strategies.
2. **Analytical Stage (Ages 7–11):** Transition to more symbolic thought, enhanced information processing, and sophisticated understanding of marketplace concepts. Improved decision-making adaptability and strategic influence strategies.

3. **Reflective Stage (Ages 11–16):** Maturation of marketplace knowledge with a focus on social aspects. Enhanced awareness of others' perspectives, adaptive consumer decisions, and strategic influence strategies.

This developmental framework recognizes the approximate nature of age associations and acknowledges task complexity influences age-related mastery. Empirical evidence supporting these stages is subsequently reviewed to substantiate the proposed model, providing a heuristic understanding of how children evolve as consumers across critical dimensions of knowledge, skills, and motivation.

3. Perceptual Stage in Consumer Socialization: Early Foundations of Consumer Understanding

In the perceptual stage (ages 3–7), children's limited understanding of advertising, particularly television commercials, is a focus of concern. While by age five, most children can identify commercials, their comprehension of the true distinction between entertainment and selling intent is nascent. Young children often describe this difference using simple perceptual cues, that is, cues which should be short, funny and attractive in terms of coloring and interest items. Explicit recognition of advertising's selling intent usually emerges around seven or eight years of age.

Goods and specific brand names become salient elements for young consumers during the perceptual stage. Even before they can read, children can recognize familiar packages and characters. By preschool, they begin recalling brand names from advertisements, associating them with vivid visual cues. Preferences for specific brands emerge in the preschool years and intensify during elementary school. However, understanding of the impact of goods and brand names remains limited to visually dominant perceptual attributes such as shape, coloring cues and textural information.

A significant achievement during this stage is that children learn to identify that money is a medium for exchanging products and goods. Between preschool and early elementary school, children rapidly develop the ability to identify coins and bills, understand their values, and engage in basic transactions. Moreover, a basic understanding of the shopping process, from selecting items to making a purchase, emerges during the preschool or kindergarten years.

Children in the perceptual stage assume the role of consumer decision-makers. They display the ability to modify knowledge based on pricing and the respective usefulness of the product. However, this skill becomes more refined and enhanced in elementary school. However, their information gathering tends to focus on perceptual aspects, with a reliance on single attributes in forming preferences or making choices.

Even at a young age, children influence on purchases, albeit from an egocentric perspective. Toddlers and preschoolers directly express their desires, either by pointing at products or verbalizing their requests. Parents may yield to these preferences, particularly for frequently-purchased items. However, children's negotiation strategies are straightforward and aim at fulfilling their immediate desires.

Consumer socialization also involves the adoption of motives and social attributes related to consumption. From a young age, children exhibit a desire for material goods, often favoring possessions over social interactions. However, these desires are primarily driven by naive considerations such as, originality, novelty and and/or quantity. Materialistic values, emphasizing the

acquisition of goods for personal happiness, are present but lack the complexity seen in older age groups.

This exploration of the perceptual stage provides insights into the foundational aspects of consumer understanding during early childhood, highlighting the evolving nature of children's cognitive and social development in the realm of consumption.

4. Analytical Stage in Consumer Socialization: Cognitive Sophistication and Strategic Understanding

By the age of 7 to 8, children enter the analytical stage, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of advertising intent. Studies (Bever et al., 1975; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974) reveal that children in this stage recognize the persuasive intent of commercials, understanding that advertisers aim to encourage people to make purchases. Additionally, they develop skepticism, acknowledging the existence of bias and deception in advertising. Their awareness grows, with a significant shift from believing commercials always tell the truth to recognizing occasional untruthfulness, linked to the advertisers' persuasive motives.

In the analytical stage, brand knowledge reaches new heights. Children are able to recall and identify brand names (Rossiter, 1976; Rubin, 1974; Ward et al., 1977). Their ability to name multiple brands in various product categories improves, demonstrating a more intricate understanding of the marketplace. Moreover, a shift occurs from relying on visible perceptual cues to considering underlying attributes for categorizing and judging similarity among products. Children now grasp the symbolic meanings and social status associated with products, showcasing a deeper understanding of consumer behavior.

During the analytic stage, children are able to understand the purpose and nature of retail establishments. From perceiving stores as sources for personal desires, children now understand that retail stores exist for profit, fulfilling both consumer wants and business objectives. Shopping scripts become more sophisticated, reflecting increased experience and the ability to incorporate conditional events into their understanding of retail transactions.

Decision-making skills witness significant development in the analytical stage. Children gather information more strategically, focusing on relevant details and ignoring irrelevant information. They consider functional and performance attributes alongside perceptual features when forming preferences. The use of compensatory and noncompensatory choice strategies becomes evident, with older children employing a variety of decision-making approaches. This stage marks a transition from a reliance on single attributes to a consideration of multiple dimensions in forming preferences.

Children exert more influence as they progress through the analytical stage. Their influence extends to purchases of child-relevant items, family activities, and, to a lesser extent, consumer durables and expensive items. At this stage, the attempts of influencing become more sophisticated, involving bargaining, compromise, and persuasion. Children engage in mutual discussions with parents, showcasing their growing ability to understand multiple perspectives. They actively participate in purchase discussions, drawing on their reasoning, persuasion, and negotiation skills developed over the years.

As children approach adolescence, social motivations for consumption and materialistic values come to the forefront. This is a crucial age. The children start comprehending social meanings and the social status which is related to the procession and the ownership of goods and things. Through this understanding they can express that they are unique and send signaling achievements for

popularity, saliency and happiness. Higher levels of materialism correlate with behaviors like increased shopping, reduced saving, and heightened responsiveness to advertising.

This exploration of the analytical stage in consumer socialization highlights children's cognitive sophistication, strategic understanding, and the emergence of social and materialistic motives in their consumption behavior.

5. The Reflective Stage

The reflective stage of children's cognitive development significantly influences their knowledge and understanding of advertising, persuasion, and consumer behavior. This stage is characterized by the ability to critically analyze and interpret various aspects of marketing communication. In this stage, children become more adept at recognizing advertisers' selling tactics, although the ability to detect specific instances of bias and deception.

Research by Bever et al. (1975) reveals that younger children, aged 7 to 10, struggle to detect misleading advertising and express challenges in distinguishing truthfulness in commercials. However, by adolescence, especially around 11 to 12 years old, children exhibit improved discernment, utilizing nuances such as voice, manner, and language to identify deceptive advertising.

As children approach early adolescence (11–14 years old), their understanding of advertising tactics and appeals becomes more explicit (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Paget, Kritt, & Bergemann, 1984). Younger children may recognize certain features like celebrity. However, they are not able to comprehend how these features are related to persuasion. Older children (ages 10–11) tend to evaluate advertisements analytically, focusing on creative content and execution.

Adolescents, with their enhanced perspective-taking skills, view advertising skeptically and analytically. They become more discerning consumers, appreciating the entertainment value of commercials while also critically analyzing their creative strategies (Moore & Lutz, 2000).

In terms of product and brand knowledge, brand awareness and recall continue to develop as children transition from middle childhood to adolescence (Keiser, 1975; Ward et al., 1977). (Achenreiner and John's, 2003) study illustrates that, by sixth grade, children develop a keen sense of the social meaning and prestige associated with brands, forming impressions based on social comparisons.

In this stage, it is evolved children's understanding of the symbolic meanings of products and/or brands with sixth graders demonstrating a more sophisticated comprehension compared to second graders. Brands not only confer status but also symbolize group identity and belonging (Jamison, 1996).

Shopping knowledge and pricing awareness in children remain relatively undeveloped until adolescence. Only by early adolescence do children perceive a full range of connections between price and value (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Fox & Kehret-Ward, 1985).

During the adolescent years, changes occur in information-seeking behaviors, decision-making skills, and the ability to adapt to complex decision environments. Adolescents seek additional sources of information, showing a preference for peers and friends (the friend influence is dominant) over parents and mass media (Moore & Stephens, 1975; Moschis & Moore, 1979). Their decision-making skills improve, allowing them to adapt strategies to more complex decision environments (Davidson, 1991a, 1991b; Nakajima & Hotta, 1989).

In terms of purchase influence and negotiation strategies, adolescents exhibit a sophisticated repertoire of strategies, appealing to parents in rational ways (Kim, Lee, & Hall, 1991; Manchanda & Moore-Shay, 1996; Palan & Wilkes, 1997).

The consumption motives and values of teenagers are strongly influenced by social considerations, with certain products and brands symbolizing group identity. Adolescents use material possessions to express self-identity and achieve a sense of belonging to distinct social groups (Jamison, 1996; Chaplin & John, 2005). For the social motivations of the consumption, higher levels of materialism are associated, with materialistic tendencies strongest in early adolescence but somewhat abating in older adolescents (Chaplin & John, 2007). Adolescents focus more on achievements as a means of achieving happiness.

In summary, the reflective stage of cognitive development significantly shapes children's understanding of advertising, persuasion, and consumer behavior. From enhanced detection of deceptive advertising to a nuanced comprehension of brand symbolism, adolescents become more discerning and sophisticated consumers. Their evolving decision-making skills and adaptive strategies contribute to a more comprehensive and critical approach to the marketplace.

6. Challenges in Future Research on Consumer Socialization:

Consumer socialization progresses through three stages—perceptual, analytical, and reflective—marking changes in children's knowledge and skills during childhood and adolescence. This review identifies significant gaps in understanding and outlines challenges for future research across various consumer socialization topics.

6.1 Advertising and Persuasion Knowledge:

While there is extensive research on advertising knowledge in children under twelve, a gap exists in understanding developments during adolescence. Further exploration of adolescents' sophisticated understanding of advertising tactics, bias types, and social context is crucial.

Research is needed to explore how advertising and persuasion knowledge are practically utilized in children's responses to persuasive communications. Attention should be given to understanding when and how this knowledge is accessed and used, especially during the reflective stage in early adolescence. (Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005)

6.2 Product and Brand Knowledge:

Understanding how children relate to brands at different stages remains a significant challenge. Limited studies on consumption symbolism focus on products rather than brands.

The application of brand relationship frameworks (Fournier, 1998) could provide insights into qualitative changes in adolescents' views of brands. Descriptive details about these changes are currently lacking in the literature.

6.3 Shopping Skills:

Despite children becoming enthusiastic shoppers early on, there is a surprising lack of recent research on the development of shopping skills, including price and volume comparisons.

Given advancements in child psychology on mathematical abilities, revisiting issues related to shopping skills, and understanding children's perception of pricing and value is essential. (Siegler & Jenkins, 1989).

6.4 Decision-Making Skills and Abilities:

A noticeable gap exists in understanding the decision strategies children possess at different ages, with limited empirical data, particularly for younger children in the perceptual stage.

Research should explore age-related differences in decision-making goals, acknowledging potential divergences from adult goals, such as choosing novel products, seeking surprise, or having fun.

6.5 Purchase Influence and Negotiation Strategies:

While in-depth interviews and observational research highlight the sophistication of older children and adolescents, research is lacking for children in the analytical stage (ages 7-11).

Another crucial part is to study the connections between purchase influence and negotiation strategies and other aspects of children's consumer knowledge and the respective behaviour.

6.6. Consumption Motives and Values:

Recent studies are beginning to focus on younger children, especially those in the analytical stage (ages 7-11). Understanding the link between social and cognitive development and aspects of consumption motives and values is crucial.

This comprehensive analysis identifies key challenges, urging researchers to address these gaps for a more nuanced understanding of consumer socialization.

7. Methodological Challenges in Studying Consumer Socialization

Understanding consumer socialization across a broad age range poses methodological challenges in sample design, stimuli selection, and measurement design. This analysis addresses these challenges and proposes strategies for advancing research in this critical area.

7.1 Sample Design:

Selecting appropriate age groups for research poses difficulties, especially when addressing a specific question without prior guidance. The proposed solution involves aligning sample selection with the perceptual (ages 3–7), analytical (ages 7–11), and reflective (ages 11–16) stages of consumer socialization.

b. Stimuli Selection:

We should consider aspects such as age differences in familiarity, relevance, and interest in stimuli. For the latter, we can see important issues the advertisements and brands. To ensure comparability across age groups, stimuli should be familiar and appealing to children of all ages or favor younger children, ruling out unfamiliarity as a factor influencing performance. (Karsten & John, 1994).

7.2 Measurement Design:

Designing measures for consumer knowledge, skills, or values presents challenges. Traditional techniques, including rating scales and unstructured interview questions, require adjustments for young children, given their verbalization limitations.

Unstructured questions may be too abstract for children under 8 years old, while rating scales raise concerns about age-related biases, such as extreme use of scale points by young children and social desirability bias among teenagers. (Derbaix & Pecheux, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2003; Chaplin & John, 2005, 2007)

New measures and techniques need development, particularly in validating rating scales across age groups. Collages prove useful for measuring constructs like self-concepts and materialism, providing a creative outlet with minimal verbalization. (Otnes et al., 1994; Gregan-Paxton & John, 1995; Wartella et al., 1979).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration of children's consumer socialization provides a thorough understanding of the developmental stages from perceptual to analytical and reflective. Rooted in scholarly works dating back to the 1950s, this review synthesizes decades of research, highlighting key findings and theoretical underpinnings. The conceptual framework integrates cognitive and social development theories, such as Piaget's stages and social perspective taking, offering a nuanced perspective on how children evolve as consumers.

The perceptual stage, characterized by a focus on immediate perceptual features and egocentric decision-making, lays the foundation for children's understanding of advertising, products, and the shopping process. As they transition to the analytical stage, cognitive sophistication emerges, accompanied by a comprehensive grasp of advertising intent, brand knowledge, and more strategic decision-making. The reflective stage marks adolescence, bringing about heightened critical analysis, improved detection of advertising tactics, and a nuanced understanding of brands and social motivations for consumption.

Despite the wealth of knowledge gained over the years, this review identifies several challenges and gaps in understanding. From the need for more research on adolescents' advertising and persuasion knowledge to the scarcity of studies on brand relationships and shopping skills, each area presents opportunities for future exploration. Methodological challenges, including sample selection, stimuli relevance, and measurement design, require careful consideration to advance research in consumer socialization.

In essence, this synthesis contributes to a comprehensive body of knowledge on children's consumer behavior, shedding light on the intricate interplay of cognitive and social factors. As we navigate the challenges outlined, future research holds the promise of uncovering deeper insights into the evolving landscape of consumer socialization, ultimately informing strategies for responsible marketing and shaping positive consumer attitudes from childhood to adolescence.

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