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Family holiday decision making: the knowledge and influence of adolescent children and parents

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influence adolescent children have over their parents with regards to holiday decisions. A dyadic method of analysis was used to determine the level of influence young people have on the decision making of their parents. Our research shows that the families in general do not see their adolescent children as more knowledgeable than the parents when it comes to holidays. However, the level of knowledge the family perceives the child to have is strongly related to how much influence the child then has over the parent. Also, the level of ‘expertness’ the family attribute to the child is strongly related to the family’s attitude towards the child as a socialisation agent for the parent. Parents knowledge on the other hand, is not related to how influenced they are by their children. Finally, daughters have a larger impact on their parents’ holiday decisions than sons.

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Background

Family influence is arguably the biggest intervening sub-sector of the consumer decision making process. Marketers are interested in the roles and relative influence of the husband, wife, and children on the purchase of a large variety of products and services (Quester, Pettigrew, & Hawkins, 2010). One important service a family makes joint decisions about is vacations and holidays. Previous studies have tended to focus on the joint-decision making of spousal interpersonal conflict and dyads involving husband and wife (e.g. Kang & Hsu, 2005; Jang, Lee, Lee, & Hong, 2007) rather than the family unit including the children. One limitation mentioned in previous research on holidays is in not considering the impact that children can make on family decision making (Flurry & Burns, 2005; Jang, et al., 2007; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004), aside from being useful in demographic segmentation (for example, parents with children or parents without children). Therefore this is a particularly underexplored area of research and requires investigation.

Children as Socialisation Agents

We do know that consumer socialisation researchers have suggested that children play an important role in socialisation of their parents (e.g. Easterling, Miller, & Weinberger, 1995; Mathur, 1999; Moschis, 1987). Children’s influence on the consumption decisions of their parents varies by the nature of the product, the stage of the decision process, and the nature of the child (Mangleburg, 1990). Adolescents opinions are often sought by parents when they believe their children are knowledgeable (Belch, et al., 2005; Grossbart, Hughes, Pryor, & Yost, 2002). Ekström (2007) states that “children can be expected to influence not only their own purchases and consumption, but also those of their parents to a far greater extent than previous generations” (p 204). Because of this, in some cultures it has become more normal to involve the children in family decision making, whereas before this was not necessarily the case (Ekström, 2007).

Consumer socialisation of adults is referred to as secondary consumer socialisation; as already existing primary knowledge is altered and developed to assist individuals function and adapt in new environments (Watne & Brennan, 2009). It has been suggested that parents are likely to be more influenced in regards to products they have limited knowledge of and those and those in which the child shows more interest in, as Ekström (2007) states that “a parent who lacks knowledge or seeks information is probably more willing to be influenced” (page 209). Children are expected to have sound influence in the family decision making process for the purchase of product/service categories in which they are directly involved in the consumption of (Belch, et al., 1985).

The consumer socialisation approach suggests that consumption is learned through social interaction with external sources; commonly referred to as ‘socialisation agents’ (Chan & McNeal, 2006; John, 1999; Taeho, 2005). Agents of socialisation are people and groups that influence a change in the learners’ self-concepts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour (Bandura, 1969, 1977). Most research on consumer socialisation has focused on the family as the main socialisation agent (see for example Dotson & Hyatt, 2000; Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003; Taeho, 2005). An agent of socialisation will have some control over rewards.
and punishments for the learner (Brim, 1966; Moschis, 1987). This means that the learner adjusts behaviour, knowledge and attitude with accordance to the agent, based on rewards and punishments. However, in order for the learner to perceive the agent as important, the learner must attribute social expert power to the agent (Watne, 2010).

**Social Expert Power**

Social power is where a person has the ability to persuade based on some attribute such as knowledge, expertise or social standing (Cialdini, 1993). In the case of children influencing their parents, such power comes from expertise and knowledge. In general, it seems likely to assume that the child has some sort of social expert power with regards to holidays if there are perceived differences in knowledge between parent and child. The strength of the expert power varies with the extent of the perception of knowledge which the learner attributes to the expert within a given area (French and Raven, 1959). Thus, children might have a high potential to influence their parents if they are seen as experts in this particular area.

The child’s expert power may also be influenced by certain demographic variables. For example, Chavda, Haley and Dunn (2005) found a difference in influence from child to parents based on the gender of the child. For example, technology purchase decisions are often male dominated. Consumers perceive men (in this case sons) to be more knowledgeable about technology products (Watne, 2010). As a result, when it comes to technology products sons may have more expert power than daughters. Further, Ekström (2007) suggested that daughters are an important source of information for their mothers in particular when it comes to interior design. With regards to holidays, it is difficult to suggest whether sons or daughters would have the most influence, or whether mothers would be more influenced than fathers.

**Children’s Influence on Holiday Decision Making**

Early research on the influence of children in decision making involving holiday or vacation planning suggests that children did exert an influence in vacation making decisions, but mainly for decisions involving whether or not the child should be taken, or decisions related to information collection and the amount of money to spend (Jenkins, 1979). Other studies have suggested that the child also has influence over where and when to go (Belch, Belch, & Ceresino, 1985). Shoham and Dalakas (2003) indicated that vacations (as a category) have high levels of disagreement in terms of perceived influence over this decision – possibly due to the exceedingly high level of influence that the child perceives they have over decision making. In this study, we will investigate the family’s perception of each other’s knowledge about holidays and how this relates to their perception of children as a source of information for their parents.

Children are being brought up in what some have called a ‘global village’; they are arguably more informed about other courtiers than any previous generation. As a result of this, children are more aware of contrasts between countries. In a study of younger children’s attitudes towards holidays overseas, Cullingford (1995) found that children as young as seven years make a clear distinction between those countries they would like to visit and those they would not. Because of this change in the holiday environment, it is likely that young adults living at home with their parents would be an important agent of socialisation for their parents that grew up in a time where holidays were less important than what it seems to be today.
Previous studies investigating the influence a child has on the parent with regards to holiday decisions also tended to be done on young children, for example, children aged five or younger, six to twelve, 12-15, or teenager under 19 (e.g. Fodness, 1992; Jenkins, 1979; Mangleburg, 1990; Palan & Wilkes, 1997). However, it has been argued that children under the age of 11 are not appropriate for socialisation studies as they are not yet fully cognitively developed (Ekström, Tansuhaj, & Foxman, 1987). Flurry (2007) states that when making family purchase decisions, parents may be more inclined to consider the input of older children. Therefore it is important to consider older children’s influence on the family unit rather than younger as has been previously researched. Consequently, this study will investigate the influence older children between 18 and 24 years have on their parent’s holiday decisions.

Recent trends and market changes have had an impact on family decision-making processes and purchasing habits with regards to how children influence their parents (Chavda, Haley, & Dunn, 2005). Some literature notes the influence of the internet has the potential to dramatically change the roles of decision makers within a family (Belch, Krentler, & Willis-Flurry; 2005). This could be due to the high level of technology adoption by teens and young adults for means of communication and information browsing, which appears also to promote socialisation (Lee & Conroy, 2005). Adolescents have been noted as ‘knowledge authorities’ through the use of the Internet (Wang, Holloway, Beatty, & Hill, 2007) and therefore they are more likely to play an influential role in family decision making (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003). In a society where holidays are often purchased on the internet, we suggest that children may have a high level of influence on their parent’s holiday decisions as well. Holidays are often purchased on the internet, and young adults in 2011 may have a different attitude towards holidays than their parents.

**Hypothesis**

For this study we wanted to see if parents would be persuaded by their children with regard to purchase decisions for holidays. We have suggested above that a socialisation agent should have some expert power over the learner in order to be perceived as influential. Further, how consumers decide about and purchase holidays have changed so much over the last few decades and children may be more comfortable with the changes than their parents. We suggest the following two hypotheses;

**H1:** Families perceive knowledge about holidays to be higher for children than their parents, which in turn gives children expert power relative to their parents.

**H2:** There is a strong positive relationship between the family’s perception of children’s knowledge about holidays and their attitude towards children as socialisation agents for their parent.

Finally, the level of ‘expertness’ may also vary depending on the gender of the parent and the child. Thus, families may have a more positive attitude towards daughters or sons as socialisation agents and mothers may have a more positive attitude towards their children as socialisation agents than fathers. We suggest the following two hypotheses;

**H3:** The family attitude towards children as socialisation agents for their parent is different for daughters and sons

**H4:** The family attitude towards children as socialisation agents for their parent is different for mothers and fathers
Method

The sample size consistent of 364 parent/child dyads which were surveyed by marketing research students in Melbourne, Australia. The children in the survey were between 18 and 24 years old and living in the same household as their parents, since the child’s influence is strongest when they are living at home (Eskstrom, 2007). The dyads were asked questions about perception of each other’s knowledge about holidays and their attitude towards children as socialisation agents (CSA) for their parents. The construct for the attitude towards CSA was measured with a 6-item scale with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. When analysing the data, individuals were used as the unit of analysis for items relating to perception of knowledge, whereas dyads were used as the unit of analysis for items relating to attitude towards children as socialisation agents (CSA). This technique facilitates the assumption of nonindependence within the dyads for their attitude towards CSA (Kenny, et al., 2006). Simple aggregate statistics (means) and t-tests were used to determine whether the differences in mean ratings were statistically different.

Results

H1 – Social Expert Power: Table 1 depicts the mean perception of knowledge and ‘t’ values between parents and children in the same family.

| Table 1: Differences between parents’ and children’s knowledge about holidays |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Mean Knowledge Parent | 5.00 | t-value: 6.22 |
| Mean Knowledge Child | 4.45 | Sig. (2-tailed): .00 |

It is evident from Table 1 that children in general do not possess a higher level of knowledge than their parents in this product category. On the contrary, parents are perceived to be significantly more knowledgeable than children. In general, families do not perceive children as having expert power about holidays, which is the foundation for children as socialisation agents where the young educate the old. Hence H1 is rejected.

H2 – Children as Socialisation Agents: Next Pearson’s correlation was used to investigate the relationship between perception of knowledge and dyads’ attitudes towards children as socialisation agents (CSA). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2.

| Table 2: Correlations between attitude towards CSA and perception of knowledge. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Pearson Correlation | Attitude CSA |
| Children’s knowledge | Correlation Coefficient | .53** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .00 |
| Parent’s knowledge | Correlation Coefficient | .03 |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .56 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 reveals that there is a strong relationship between attitude towards CSA and the family’s perception of the child’s knowledge. This means that even if parents are seen as more knowledgeable, the child’s knowledge or expert power is still a factor in decision making. The family’s who do see their child as an expert are likely to be positive about CSA when it comes to holidays. H2 is supported. Note that the perception of parental knowledge is unrelated to attitude towards CSA.
**H3 & H4 – Level of Expertness and Gender:** Finally, Table 3 reveals that there are gender differences when it comes to attitude towards children as socialisation agents (CSA) for their parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3:</th>
<th>Attitude towards CSA for sons and daughters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Attitude towards CSA sons</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Attitude towards CSA daughters</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Attitude towards CSA fathers</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Attitude towards CSA mothers</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value:</td>
<td>3.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed):</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value:</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed):</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H3 is supported while H4 is rejected: Daughters are more influential with regards to holidays than sons, while there is no difference with regards to how influenced fathers or mothers are.

**Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

Previous research on children’s influence on holidays and vacation planning suggested that there was a high level of disagreement over the level of influence the child had on this decision. Our research suggests that this could potentially be because the parent has a higher level of knowledge in this category than the child, and therefore the parent is less likely to be influenced in regards to this category (as opposed to products they have limited knowledge in, such as technological products (Watne & Brennan, 2009)). However, the high level of expert power influenced by the parent did not significantly affect the ability of the child to act as a socialisation agent with regards to holiday planning. Instead, the child’s level of expert power, while lower than the parents, still had a positive relationship towards their ability to act as an agent of socialisation. Thus, if the dyad see the child as knowledgeable regarding holidays, the parents are likely to have a very positive attitude towards CSA.

To date, most families do not see their children as experts in this product category. This is possibly because the product category ‘holidays’ was too broad, or because we did not clarify who the holiday was for. As previous research notes that children are more influential when they are directly involved in the ‘consumption’ of the product, this may be an important distinction to make. The responses may also have been different if we had asked about “leisure travelling” or “vacations” instead. These would be important aspects to investigate in future research.

Mothers and fathers seem to have an equal attitude towards their children as socialisation agents, but daughters have a larger influence on their parents than sons. Future research should investigate why families perceive daughters to be a more important agent of socialisation than sons when it comes to their parents’ holiday decisions.

When developing communication plans for family holidays, it may be effective to address children and encourage them to influence their parents. It would further be effective to attempt to position the children as knowledgeable on the topic; otherwise the parent would not perceive the child as an important socialisation agent. This means that in order to effectively target families with regards to holiday decisions, the child should not be seen as a minor suggestive force for the parent, but rather as the one that actually positively contributes to the decision. The strong positive correlation between attitude towards children as socialisation agents and knowledge of the child clearly demonstrate that the parents will utilise their children as a socialisation agent if they perceive the child to be knowledgeable.
References


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