



Research Paper

Impact of Demographic Variables on Parents Response to Pester Power

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Abstract:

Children are known to play a very important role in the purchase decisions made by the family, thus becoming an attractive target for marketers. Children employ a number of pester power tactics or strategies to get their demands fulfilled. Parents respond differently to the pester power strategies used by the child. The purpose of this research was to understand the parents' response to pester power. We have also tried to analyse the impact of demographic variables age, gender and family income on the response of the parents to pester power.

Keywords: Children, Pester Power, Parents Response

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I. INTRODUCTION

For marketers, the family constitutes one among the highly important decision making and consumption units. This turned the attention of marketers toward the family for their campaigns for more than a decade (Calvert, 2008). Children are known to play a very important role in the purchase decisions made by the family, thus becoming an attractive target for marketers. Recognizing children's influence on the family's purchase decisions, marketers think the children constitute the primary market, an influencing market, as well as the future market (Kaur & Singh, 2006). The children of today's generation are well-informed compared to those of the previous generations. Children across generations are known to be influenced by forces "such as parents, peers, media, economic and social events, and popular culture. These forces create common value systems distinguishing one generation from the next (Twenge et al., 2010)" (Campbell & Twenge, 2014). The changing family dynamics in the technological age has rendered children capable of influencing activities in the family unlike the past generations when they played a more passive role. The parents of today's generation would attest to the fact that when they were children, they didn't have much say in the family.

The trend of marketers focusing on children is not new. Studies done in the past suggest that the children have been the target of marketers since the concept of modern mass marketing came into the picture (Calder, Robertson & Rossiter, 1975; Carlson & Grossbart, 1988; Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Cook, 2004; Darian, 1998; John, 1999; McNeal & Yeh, 1990; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). Children are known to influence their parents' purchase decision in four different ways (Wang, Wut, & Chou, 2009). First, children buy products according to their individual preferences. Second, children buy products directly by using their pocket money. Third, they influence the choice of parents for products used by the family or used for joint consumption. Lastly, they influence parents' own preferences (McNeal, 1992).

So, what makes children influencers in the family's purchase decision? Children indulge in activities such as watching television, accessing the Internet, and interacting with family and friends almost on a daily basis, from which they gain knowledge about a variety of topics. When they accompany their parents on their visits to stores, supermarkets, or malls, they get accidentally exposed to several products. These so-called socialisation agents shape children's thinking and decision making, which in turn influence their buying behaviour. Importantly, socialisation agents provide information to children from different perspectives. They

smartly use this information to place demand and to decide what products they need to buy. Summing up, the important socialisation agents for children include television, family, peers, Internet, and retail stores.

Using cues from socialisation agents that determine children's decisions to purchase a product, they first place a demand on their parents to buy the product of their choice. If their demand is accepted by the parents, they feel happy. But if their demand is not accepted, they resort to pester power to get their demand fulfilled. The children make use of a variety of pester power strategies and we are keen to identify them in our study. Parents tend to employ various tactics in response to children's pester power. We would also be examining the various ways parents respond when children employ pester power to force their decisions.

Dictionary Meaning of Pester Power

The *Cambridge Dictionary* calls pester power "the ability that children have to make their parents buy something, by asking for it many times until they get it."

According to *Collins English Dictionary*, pester power is "the ability possessed by a child to nag a parent relentlessly until the parent succumbs and agrees to the child's request."

The *Macmillan Dictionary* describes pester power as "the ability of children to make their parents buy things for them by continuing to ask them until they agree to do it."

The *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* explain pester power as "the ability that children have to make their parents buy things, by repeatedly asking them until they agree."

Pester Power as Defined in Research

There is no formal or common definition for pester power in academia. Based on research done earlier, the term *pester power* has been defined by different researchers in different ways. The most simplest definition has been given by Quinn, who says pester power is "repetitive asking/requesting for a specific item and/or service" (Quinn, 2002, p. 7). Martino explains that pester power is "the children's ability to nag their parents into purchasing items they may not otherwise buy" (Martino, 2004, p. 1). According to Nicholls and Cullen, pester power is "a child's attempt to exert influence over parental purchases in a repetitive and sometimes confrontational way" (Nicholls & Cullen, 2004, p. 78). McDermott and others interpret pester power as "the children's unprecedented power as consumers and their ability to deploy a variety of tactics to exert influence over purchasing by others" (McDermott, O'Sullivan, Stead, & Hastings, 2006, p. 513).

Pester Power Strategies

Children employ a number of pester power tactics or strategies to get their demands fulfilled. They could be classified as direct and indirect influence strategies. Direct influence strategies are evident strategies used by the children to influence their parents' decisions and is a purposeful attempt to influence the decision outcome of the parents. When the children influence the decision outcome of the parents unintentionally, they are said to be using the indirect influence strategy.

Authors have identified different pester power strategies used by children. Marquis (2004) lists three influence strategies employed by children for influencing parental decisions on food purchase. Palan and Wilkes (1997) explain each of these strategies: bargaining (offer deals), persuasion (express opinions on foods, begging, whining, stating that the product is preferred), and emotional appeal (asking repetitively, expressing anger, sulking, and being unnaturally nice to parents).

Parents' Response to Pester Power

Parents generally have a hard time in responding to demands made by children. They cannot brush them off all the time. So they respond to the demand of the child in various ways. They don't readily accept all the demands. They use a mix of easily accepting some demands and plainly refusing to fulfil some others. The marketers need to understand the effect of child requests on parents.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature was widely referenced for this study and various journals, conference proceedings, and reports formed our sources of data on the topics of interest to this study. Due attention was also paid to the latest research done in the field.

McNeal (2007) describes the way the relationship between kids and parents evolves during the shopping experience. The newborns continuously observe their parents' behaviour up to the age of 6 months. Child requirements begin to form from 6 to 24 months of age. Even when they are not able to speak, they place demand by making noise or by making use of their hands. They start pleading for products from parents between 24 and 48 months of age and also start grabbing products and putting them in shopping carts. Between 48 and 72 months, they gain an awareness of the purchasing process. Between 72 and 100 months, they start

making independent purchases using their pocket money. It is therefore clear that children are attracted toward products that they want to play with or own from a very young age.

Children not only start observing and understanding the market but also start recognizing and remembering the brand names. Ross and Harradine (2004) conducted a study to determine the level of brand awareness among different age groups. The children selected were in the age group of 5–11 years. They found that children were aware of the brand names at a very early age. Though they recognized the brand name, most of them were not able to pronounce the brand name correctly. Children consider branded products as trendy. Most of the children are able to recognize brand names of product categories like fast food and snacks. The knowledge of brands helps them to place a demand from their parents to buy a specific product for them. It also helps them when engaging in conversations with peer groups (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010).

Each family member plays a part in the purchase decision of the family. Singh (1992) conducted a study on Indian families and found that there is a difference in the role played by each member in purchase sub-decisions. The decision on “when to purchase” was taken jointly by husband and wife. The purchase decisions of parents were also influenced by the children. Another study done by Wilson and Wood (2004) found that most of the products parents purchase are their own personal choices and not based on the preference of the children. Bessouh, Iznasni, and Benhabib (2016) conducted a study to analyse the influence of various members of the family in the purchase decision. They reported that the father plays the central role and has monopoly over the decision-making process.

Ogba and Johnson (2010) found that parents don't give in to the child's request and there is a nonsignificant relationship between children's attempt to influence parents' purchase and the product parents actually bought. On the contrary, Kuhn and Eischen (1997) argued that children have a more important role to play and in many of the cases children are the primary decision makers and not the parents. Sondhi and Basu (2014), in their study, divided the parents into three categories: time-pressed parents, child-centric parents, and socially influenced parents. Time-pressed parents were the ones who had nuclear families, did not have much time to spend with children, and earned a salary of more than INR 60,000 per month. The child-centric parents were concerned about the child's overall development. They spend time with children. These parents were anxious about the hygiene and safety of products for children. The socially influenced parents were the ones that were influenced by the peer groups and also by children while making the purchase decision.

The attitude of parents and family defines the involvement of the child in the purchase decision of the family. Over a period of time, changes in the family dynamics, especially the predominance of the nuclear family, has meant that children's voices are also heard. Hill and Tilley (2002) have shown that changes in society have heavily influenced the development and behaviour of children. New family situations and the ever-changing external environment obligate children to be equipped and become self-sufficient even before they attain some level of maturity and to adjust lifestyles more expediently than their intellectual growth may tolerate. For this reason, outside influences such as marketing communications tend to have a particularly strong effect on the vulnerability of children. The occupational status of parents, family income, and family structure play an important role in the life of the child as a consumer.

The working status of parents determines the level of influence the children have on their purchase decisions. Guha (2013) revealed that working women are more involved in the purchase activities when compared to non working married women. Naturally, the children of working women are more involved in the purchase process. Previous research has evaluated whether the working status of the parents matters for the influence of children in buying decisions. One of the studies done by Jeevananda and Kumar (2012) found that the degree of children's influence is more in case both parents are working.

Children employ various pester power strategies to influence their parents' purchase decisions. Parents respond in various ways to these pester power strategies. They are more likely to accept the request that is made by the entire family and not just by the children. Acceptance rate is higher for products for family use compared to children's products. The products such as toys, candy, and snacks were mostly refused by the parents. Acceptance rate was found to be higher for products that were highly promoted (Jensen, 1995). There were ten different responses of mothers to the request made by the child: (1) giving in, (2) yelling, (3) ignoring, (4) distracting, (5) calm consistency, (6) avoidance, (7) limiting commercial exposure, (8) rules and negotiations, (9) allowing alternative items, and (10) giving an explanation to the child (Henry & Borzekowski, 2011). On the other hand, Calderon (2017) included seven kinds of responses of parents and found that the most common response of parents was not responding to the demand either by remaining silent or acting as though they have not heard the request. This was followed by refusing the demand either by giving explanation or telling children to return the item. Lawlor and Prothero (2011) proposed four kinds of reactions of parents to pester power: negotiation, wait, refusal, and surrender.

Marshall (2014) found in their discussions with the parents that parents, in response to children's nagging, acknowledge that they respond by either refusing the demand made by the child or ignoring their demands, discussing with the child about the demand, bargaining with the child, or they just give in to the

demand. One of the studies found that the majority of the parents accepted the demands made by the child. The parents purchase some of the items that were demanded by the child in the store. The reason for accepting the demand was to avoid children throwing tantrums in the store. The response of other parents vary from denying the request made by the child to suggesting alternatives (Wingert, Zachary, Fox, Gittelsohn, & Surkan, 2014). Another reason for parents accepting the demand made by the child is either continuous nagging by the child or guilt of parents for not spending enough time with their children (Kumar, Powar, & Swarnakar, 2012).

Turner, Kelly, and McKenna (2006) conducted a study to investigate the parents' perception about children's influence on family purchase decisions. It was found that most of the parents believe that the children influence their purchase decision and they give in to the demands made by their children. In case of disagreement between the parent and the child, the parent requested the child and reasoned with or persuaded the child. Only in a few cases, the parents act in an authoritarian manner (Darian, 1998). Mothers feel that giving in and accepting the child's repetitive request was not a good decision (Henry & Borzekowski, 2011). It is difficult for parents to refuse the request made by the child as the child grows (Marquis, 2004).

The response of parents varies according to their own education level and family income. Parents with higher education attainment yield less to the begging and whining strategy used by the child to get the product. Family income was also found to be a strong predictor of the response of parents. Parents belonging to higher income family groups were more likely to yield more to the pester power strategies like begging and whining, negotiations, deals, examples from friends, shouting, expressing anger, and getting mad (Shoham & Dalakas, 2006). Parents in lower income groups usually denied the request repeatedly made by the child (Askelson et al., 2019). Parents placed in highly demanding jobs tend to easily accept the demand made by the child and succumb to their pester power (Bhattacharyya & Kohli, 2007).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in India. Parents (either mother or father) of children in the age group of 6–12 years of age were the intended participants for our study. Only those parents who had at least one child in the age group of 6–12 years were considered. The sample size for our study was 510 parents of the children in the age group of 6–12 years, which included 433 mothers and 77 fathers. The data for the study was collected using a structured questionnaire.

Demographic Profile

There were a total of 510 children in the study, out of which 178 were in the age group of 6–8 years, 170 in the age group of 8–10 years, and 162 in the age group of 10–12 years. Out of the 510 children whose parents participated in our study, 300 (58.8%) were girls and 210 (41.2%) were boys. As regards the family structure, we found that 229 children (44.9%) stayed in a nuclear family and 281 (55.1%) in a joint family.

The children were categorised into four income classes based on the annual income of the family: 92 children (18.0%) belonged to a family having income less than INR 5 lakh, 121 (23.7%) belonged to a family having an income between INR 5 and 10 lakh, 157 (30.8%) belonged to a family in the income group of INR 10–15 lakh, and 140 (27.5%) were from a family having income above INR 15 lakh.

The occupational status of the parents of the children was divided into four categories: (i) both parents working, (ii) only husband working, (iii) only wife working, and (iv) none working. In our study, 176 children (34.5%) belonged to a family in which both husband and wife were working, 330 (64.7%) belonged to a family in which only the husband works, while only 4 (0.8%) belonged to the family in which only the wife works. Majority of the children belonged to the family where only the husband is the earning member of the family.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

As children deploy various pester power strategies, parental response to them varies. We now look into ten different kinds of responses used by parents: (i) easily accepting the demand, (ii) saying no politely, (iii) saying no straightforwardly, (iv) scolding them, (v) not reacting to their demands, (vi) telling them will buy it later, (vii) giving them reasonable justification for not buying, (viii) asking them to behave properly, (ix) asking them to do something in return, and (x) asking them to buy a substitute.

H1: There is a significant difference between the age of the child and response of parents to pester power

We employed ANOVA to analyse whether the age of the child has an impact on the response of parents to pester power. The age of the child was found to have a significant impact on the responses of parents like saying no politely $F(2,507) = 10.058, p < .001$; saying no straightforwardly $F(2,507) = 62.349, p < .001$; scolding them $F(2,507) = 30.488, p < .001$; not reacting to their demands them $F(2,507) = 99.112, p < .001$; telling them will buy it later them $F(2,507) = 4.738, p = .009$; giving them reasonable justification for not buying them $F(2,507) = 14.562, p < .001$; asking them to behave properly them $F(2,507) = 69.563, p < .001$; asking them to do

something in return $F(2,507) = 3.637, p = .027$. However, the age of the child had no significant impact on the response, easily accepting the demand $F(2,507) = 0.348, p = .706$.

The parental response varied by age of the child. While they used clear-cut responses to younger children, they deployed relatively softer responses to older children. The response to younger children included saying no straightforwardly, scolding them, not reacting to demand of children, telling them they will buy it later, asking them to behave properly, asking them to do something in return, and asking them to buy a substitute. The parents reacted to demands of older children by saying no politely and giving them reasonable justification for not buying.

H2: There is a significant difference between the gender and response of parents to pester power

We again used ANOVA to test where there was any impact of gender of the child on parental response. It was found that there was a significant difference in the response of parents to the pester power used by boys and girls in case of responses like saying no straightforwardly $F(1,508) = 7.331, p = .007$; not reacting to their demand $F(1,508) = 16.223, p < .001$; asking them to do something in return $F(1,508) = 9.233, p = .002$; and asking them to buy a substitute $F(1,508) = 4.395, p = .037$. The p -value in these cases was less than 0.05 as shown in Table 4.59. Thus we accept H2 for these responses.

However, there was no significant difference in the gender of the child when parental response was easily accepting the demand $F(1,508) = 3.339, p = .068$; saying no politely $F(1,508) = 0.182, p = .670$; scolding them $F(1,508) = 0.120, p = .730$; telling them will buy it later $F(1,508) = 1.585, p = .209$; giving them reasonable justification for not buying $F(1,508) = 0.772, p = .380$, and asking them to behave properly $F(1,508) = 0.321, p = .571$. Thus we reject H2 for these responses of parents.

The parents respond by saying no straightforwardly more to boys ($M = 3.37$ and $SD = 0.89$) compared to girls ($M = 3.15$ and $SD = 0.91$). Parents take the position of not reacting to the demands of boys ($M = 3.13$ and $SD = 1.01$) than those of girls ($M = 2.79$ and $SD = 0.86$). Parents also ask children to do something in return in case they want their demand to be accepted. This response was more in case of girls ($M = 2.49$ and $SD = 0.92$) than boys ($M = 2.26$ and $SD = 0.76$).

H3: There is a significant difference between the family income and response of parents to pester power

ANOVA was applied to test this hypothesis. There was significant difference in the income of family and responses of parents such as easily accepting the demand $F(3,506) = 5.431, p = .001$; saying no politely $F(3,506) = 21.915, p < .001$; saying no straightforwardly $F(3,506) = 6.176, p < .001$; scolding them $F(3,506) = 42.240, p < .001$; telling them to buy it later $F(3,506) = 36.171, p < .001$; giving them reasonable justification for not buying $F(3,506) = 32.829, p < .001$; asking them to behave properly $F(3,506) = 6.879, p < .001$; asking them to do something in return $F(3,506) = 8.965, p < .001$ and asking them to buy a substitute $F(3,506) = 44.328, p < .001$. Since the p -value in these cases was less than .05, we accept H3. However, there was no significant difference in the income of the family and not reacting to the demand of the child $F(3,506) = 2.487, p = .060$. Since p -value was more than .05, we reject H3 for the response of parents not reacting to the demands of the child.

Parents in the lower income group were found to respond to the pester power of children by saying no straightforwardly, scolding them, not reacting to the demands of the child, and asking them to behave properly. On other hand, the parents in higher income groups responded to demands of children by easily accepting them, saying no politely, telling them that they can buy it later, giving them reasonable justification for not buying, or by asking them to buy a substitute.

V. DISCUSSION

The family is one of the most important consumption units for marketers. Over a period of time, they have shifted their attention to the role individual members in the family play while taking purchase-related decisions. Children as an influencer of purchase decisions hold a special attraction for marketers. Pester power is a powerful tool in the hands of the children in order to get their demands fulfilled. It is an interesting aspect of children's behaviour. Once parents say no to their demand, the range of persuasive actions they employ from the unsettling to gentle is simply an amazing expression of their thinking. Children use various kinds of pester power strategies. Demographic characteristics alter the kind of pester power strategies employed by children. A significant difference was found between the age of the child and use of pester power strategy in case of all the four categories of pester power tactics: aggressive strategies, emotional strategies, persuasion strategies, and pressure strategies.

Interestingly, parental response to pester power strategies carry strictness, gentle persuasion, and also striking a deal (asking children to do something in return). The response of parents also varies by age of the child. Broadly, parents react by accepting the children's demands, denying either politely or straightforwardly, scolding them, not reacting to their demands, telling them will buy the product demanded later, giving them

reasonable justification for not buying in case their demand is not accepted, asking them to behave properly, asking them to do something in return if they want their demand to be accepted, or asking them to buy substitute in place of product being demanded. Parental income significantly moderated their response. However, only in case of parents not reacting to the demands of the child, the difference was not found to be significant.

The nature of parental response was found to vary by income. While parents with higher incomes displayed some distinction in their responses, those having lower incomes were generally curt. Parents in the high income group (annual income above INR 15 lakh) were found to either easily accept the demand made by the child, saying no politely, telling them that they can buy it later, giving them reasonable justification for not buying, asking them to do something in return, or asking children to buy substitutes. Parents in lower income groups (annual income below INR 5 lakh) were found to react to the demands of children by either saying no straightforwardly, scolding children, and not reacting to the demands made by the child.

Parental response to pestering also tended to vary by age of the child. Our study found that there was a significant difference between the age of the child and the responses of the parents. The difference was not found to be significant only for the response of easily accepting demand. To younger children, who tend to be a bit aggressive in their pestering, parents are stern in their response by saying no straightforwardly, scolding them, not reacting to their demand, telling them they will buy it later, asking them to behave properly, asking them to do something in return, and by asking them to buy a substitute. Parental response is nuanced and discerning when responding to equally gentler pester strategies of older children such as saying no politely and giving them reasonable justification for not buying. The younger children are more stubborn as compared to older children, and so parents also tend to be tough with them. Older children, being mature, are eager to know why parents are not getting them what they want. So parents give out reasons why their demand is not being met.

Gender of the child didn't matter in case of responses like easily accepting the demand of the child, saying no politely, scolding the child, telling them to buy the product later, giving them reasonable justifications for not buying, and asking them to behave properly. However, a significant difference was found between the gender of the child and the response of parents like saying no straightforwardly, not reacting to the demands of the child, asking them to do something in return, and asking them to buy a substitute. Parents responded to boys by saying no straightforwardly, not reacting to their demands, or asking them to buy a substitute. In the case of girls, parents ask children to do something in return in case they want their demand to be accepted. This response was less utilised for boys.

VI. CONCLUSION

The marketers treat children as a separate segment. Children are known to play a substantial role in the family's purchase decision. Their role is not just restricted to the product they use but also the products used by the family. Children employ pester power to get their demands fulfilled for buying products. Thus they influence the purchase decision of their parents. Marketers need to understand what entices children to buy a product. The focus of marketers shouldn't be only on gaining children's attention but also in explaining the utility or fun value of the product. Marketers should not treat children as a single segment as children belonging to different age groups behave differently. Parents also respond to pester power strategies in different ways. So the focus of marketers should not only be on children but need to convince parents also.

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