The development of a child into a consumer

Patti M. Valkenburga,*, Joanne Cantorb

aDepartment of Communication, Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, Oude Hoogstraat 24, 1012 CE Amsterdam, The Netherlands

bDepartment of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive model of the development of children’s consumer behavior from infancy to 12 years of age. Although there is no single definition of consumer behavior in the literature, those that have been employed seem to entail at least four characteristics. A consumer is able to (1) feel wants and preferences, (2) search to fulfill them, (3) make a choice and a purchase, and (4) evaluate the product and its alternatives. The authors argue that the development of consumer behavior occurs in four phases, and that in each phase, one of the four characteristics of consumer behavior emerges. By drawing together a number of theories and ideas currently in the literature, the authors discuss each of the phases of consumer behavior and explain why particular characteristics of consumer behavior emerge at particular ages. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Children; Advertising; Socialization; Consumer behavior; Consumer socialization

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, marketers and advertisers of children’s products have developed a massive and diverse spectrum of strategies to reach the child consumer (Kline, 1993). They are interested in children for three reasons. First, today’s children in western societies have considerable amounts of money to spend on needs and wants of their own, which qualify them as an important primary market (McNeal, 1992). Second, children are also a future market (McNeal, 1992). It has been demonstrated that children develop brand loyalty at an early age, and that favorable attitudes toward brands last well into adulthood (McNeal, 1992). Finally, children are an important market of influencers. Not only do they
give direction to daily household purchases, such as snacks, sweets, and breakfast products, as they get older, they also have a say in their parents’ choice of the restaurant, the holiday destination, and the new car (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1992).

The increased economic power and influence on family decisions of today’s children can be explained by several socioeconomic changes in the 1970s and 1980s. Parents have a larger income and a higher educational level; they often postpone having children and have fewer of them; and there are more single-parent families and dual-working-parent families (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Together, these factors encourage parents to be more indulgent and to take care that their children do not lack anything (McNeal, 1992).

Another factor that explains the increase in children’s influence on family decisions is the liberalization of parent–child relationships in western societies. A few decades ago, child-rearing patterns were characterized by authority, obedience, and respect (Torrance, 1998). In today’s families, however, understanding, equality, and compromise are considered to be of paramount importance. The parent–child relationship is no longer regulated by authority and command but rather by negotiation (Torrance, 1998). In modern western families, children’s opinions and participation in decision-making processes are encouraged and taken very seriously. As a result, children have never been as emancipated, articulate, and market-mature as they currently are (Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

Children’s consumer behavior has often been studied within the paradigm of consumer socialization, which was developed almost three decades ago (Ward, 1974). Consumer socialization is seen as a rather effortless process by which children learn the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to function as consumers (Ward, 1974). Although there is no single definition of consumer behavior, those that have been employed seem to entail similar characteristics. A consumer is able to (1) feel wants and preferences, (2) search to fulfill them, (3) make a choice and a purchase, and (4) evaluate the product and its alternatives (Mowen & Minor, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the phases during which the different characteristics of consumer behavior develop in children and why they occur at particular ages. To this end, we draw together a number of theories and ideas currently in the literature that may increase our understanding of the development of children’s consumer behavior. Our discussion relies on existing cognitive developmental theories (e.g., Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993), as well as developmental theories of parent–child interaction (e.g., Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990), marketing models (e.g., Acuff, 1997; McNeal, 1992), and theories of children’s likes and dislikes of toys and entertainment (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000).

A basic assumption of our discussion is that children of all ages strive to understand their physical and social environment. Moreover, their level of understanding determines to a large extent their tastes and preferences for products, information, and entertainment, and as a result, their consumer behavior. In addition, we assume that children of different developmental levels vary in their attention and susceptibility to different environmental forces (e.g., commercial media, peer pressure) that influence their consumer behavior and values. We argue that the development of consumer behavior occurs in four phases, and that in each phase, one of the abovementioned characteristics of consumer behavior emerges.
2. Infants and toddlers (age 0–2): feeling wants and preferences

Although little is known about how children’s wants and tastes are formed during childhood, it has been shown that even toddlers firmly express their preferences regarding what to eat, wear, watch, or play with (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995). Some of these wants and tastes seem to be innate; others are formed during childhood.

Researchers agree that babies come into the world with some very definitive preferences for tastes and smells. Newborns seem to come equipped with a preference for sweet substances, whereas, sour, salty, or bitter liquids elicit expressions of disgust (Ganchrow, Steiner, & Daher, 1983). Infants have also been shown to dislike the same smells that adults consider disagreeable. When they detect an unpleasant smell, such as vinegar, they turn their head away or turn up their nose (Rieser, Yonas, & Wilkner, 1976).

Children are also born with an innate tendency to respond to language. The “favorite auditory diet” of a baby is the human voice (Flavell et al., 1993, p. 276). Babies are especially attentive to a form of speech that is referred to as “motherese,” which is characterized by a slower pace, a higher pitch, and greatly exaggerated intonations (Flavell et al., 1993; Siegler, 1991). It has been shown that infants as young as 4 months clearly prefer tape-recorded speech in motherese to speech in standard intonations (Fernald, 1985). This preference lasts for several years. The use of motherese may increase the chance of success of audio and audiovisual stories and programs for this age group (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000).

Babies also seem to enjoy listening to music, and they prefer rhythmic to nonrhythmic sounds (Siegler, 1991). By the age of 4–6 months, they start to turn their head in the direction of the source of music, and they have been observed to listen to music with an “unmistakable expression of astonishment and joy” (Moog, 1976, p. 39). Because young children are so responsive to songs, rhymes, and music, these devices are often used to elicit interest in educational and entertainment programs for young children (Wakshlag, Reitz, & Zillmann, 1982), though the song lyrics may not be well understood even at older ages (Calvert & Billingsley, 1998).

Although babies are quite responsive to music and speech, their visual perception matures more slowly. However, babies do have distinct preferences for certain types of images. They like to watch moving objects with primary colors and sharp contrasts (Acuff, 1997; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981). It is no coincidence, therefore, that toys and entertainment programs for infants and toddlers are often produced in such colors.

When children are 4–5 months of age, they start to develop an interest in television programs. Observational studies have shown that they are mostly interested in children’s programs, such as Sesame Street and The Teletubbies, that have brightly colored fantasy figures, and in commercials (Lemish, 1987; Valkenburg, 1999). Both children’s programs and commercials specialize in drawing attention by visual and auditory means, and babies are very sensitive to these kinds of stimuli (Lemish, 1987; Siegler, 1991).

By 8 months of age, most children are able to sit erect without support. At this time, they typically begin to be allowed to sit in the child seat of the shopping cart, from which they observe and admire the brightly colored products that are often deliberately positioned at the eye level of children (McNeal, 1992). After a few months of observing, children start to be
able to take products from the supermarket shelves, and between 18 and 24 months of age, they start to ask their parents to buy products (McNeal, 1992).

When children are 18 months of age, they increasingly recognize familiar objects and faces (Siegler, 1991). By the age of 2, children also start to make connections between television advertising and products in the store when they accompany their parents (Valkenburg, 1999). A recent survey of 360 Dutch parents showed that 40% of the parents of 2-year-olds said that their child had recognized an advertised product in the store. This percentage increased rapidly over the succeeding few years. About 60% of the 3-year-olds, 84% of the 4-year-olds, and 88% of the 5-year-olds were reported to have recognized an advertised product in the store (Valkenburg, 1999).

Although children up to 18 months of age have been shown to have distinct preferences for smells, colors, sounds, objects, and images, their behavior is still primarily reactive and not very intentional. Although children experience their own wants and preferences, which are important characteristics of consumer behavior, they cannot yet be considered as true, goal-directed consumers. They are still primarily children of consumers. However, this status changes rapidly as they enter the next phase in their development as consumers.

3. Preschoolers (age 2–5): nagging and negotiating

There are several characteristics of the preschooler’s mind that determine children’s tastes and preferences for products and entertainment, and as a result, their consumer behavior. One of these characteristics is their limited ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Preschool children often believe that the characters and events that they encounter in the media are real. Often, 2- and 3-year-olds think that television characters reside inside the TV set (Noble, 1975). Jaglom and Gardner (1981), for instance, observed that some 2–3-year-olds ran to get a paper towel to clean up an egg they saw break on television. By the time they are 3 years old, children start to make statements indicating attachment to television personalities (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981). However, because children between the ages of 2 and 5 often do not adequately distinguish between fantasy and reality, they can just as easily focus their attraction on an animal or a fantasy protagonist as on a real-life character.

Preschool-aged children also think that the information in commercials is true. They often do not understand the persuasive intent of commercials, and they have trouble distinguishing commercials from television programs (see Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000 for a review). It is not surprising, therefore, that advertising and marketing efforts have been reported to have the highest impact on children below the age of 8 (Acuff, 1997; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000).

Because of their immature cognitive capacity, young preschool-aged children need more time than adults to interpret and make sense of information and television images. This is the reason why young preschoolers often respond best to programs with a slow pace and with lots of repetition (Acuff, 1997), for example, Barney and Friends and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. For the same reason, young preschoolers often prefer familiar contexts and visuals (Lemish, 1987), objects, and animals that they can verbally label, such as a cat, a dog, or a horse. They like to watch programs that show babies and young children (Lemish, 1987), and they especially like nonthreatening real or animated animals, such as kind birds, friendly
dinosaurs, and babyish creatures like the Teletubbies (Acuff, 1997; Cupitt, Jenkinson, Ungerer, & Waters, 1998). It must be noted, however, that by the age of 4, children, particularly boys, often start to prefer more rapid and adventurous entertainment programs and products (Acuff, 1997).

Another characteristic of preschool children that may influence their consumer behavior is centration, the tendency to center attention on an individual, striking feature of an object or image, to the exclusion of other, less striking features (Flavell et al., 1993). A qualitative study reported in Acuff (1997) is illustrative for this tendency of young children. In this study, 5-year-old girls were presented with three dolls. Two of the dolls were very expensive, had beautiful and realistic faces, and came with sophisticated mechanical effects. The third doll was cheaply made, but this doll had a big, red sequined heart on her dress. To the surprise of the researchers, the majority of the girls preferred the cheap doll with the sequined heart. This consumer behavior is typical of preschoolers. When judging a product, they focus their attention on one striking characteristic. Preschool children, therefore, have little eye for detail and quality, which are important characteristics of a mature consumer.

A final characteristic of children in the preschool age group that has implications for their consumer behavior is that they cannot keep their minds off tempting products for long (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Research has shown that although an adult can teach young children how to use certain distractive strategies when presented with a tempting stimulus (Mischel & Patterson, 1976), children under the age of 5 usually do not use such strategies to delay gratification. When they see an attractive toy or snack, they center their attention on the desirable aspects of this stimulus and have great difficulty resisting it (Mischel & Ebbeson, 1970). This tendency in young children can result in embarrassing situations for parents in the supermarket or toy store, as children start to whine, scream, and cry when their parents refuse to buy something they want. The survey by Valkenburg (1999), cited above, asked parents about such conflicts. This survey showed that 41% of the parents of 2-year-olds said that they had experienced a conflict with their child during a store visit (see Fig. 1). This percentage increased rapidly in the age range of 2–5 years: 59% of the parents of 3-year-olds and 70% of the parents of 5-year-olds had experienced such a conflict with their child (see Fig. 1).

As Fig. 1 shows, the parent–child conflicts began to decrease again between the ages of 5 and 6. This decline could be due to the fact that at around this age, children become increasingly able to use control strategies (e.g., covering their eyes, inventing a game) to resist temptation (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). However, the decrease in parent–child conflicts might also result from children’s growing ability to negotiate. By the age of 5, particularly in homes where negotiation plays an important role in family communication, children possess a sophisticated range of negotiation strategies (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girmius-Brown, 1987; McNeal, 1992). Some researchers assume that the development of negotiation strategies in children has its origin in the “terrible twos,” when children start to exhibit explicit uncooperative and noncompliant behavior. This type of overt noncompliance in children is often only temporary, because children soon start to understand that these forms of resistance are less effective than the strategy of negotiation. Although direct defiance, whining, and tantrums are still relatively common among 3-year-olds (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990), children of this age are already able to provide explanations and excuses and to offer alternatives or compromises for not
carrying out their parent’s wishes (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). Soon, they also start to employ such strategies to persuade their parents to respond to their wants and wishes (McNeal, 1992). This might explain why parent–child conflicts in the store decrease when children enter the next phase in their development as consumers.

4. Early elementary school (age 5–8): adventure and the first purchase

Many of the characteristics of preschoolers also hold for early elementary school children. Most children in this age range still exhibit the characteristic of centration, although this tendency is on the decline (Flavell et al., 1993). Children’s ability to distinguish fantasy and reality is also in transition. Almost all children by this stage know that Big Bird is a person dressed in a costume (Howard, 1998), and they also judge marked violations of physical reality, such as animation and special effects, as unreal (Dorr, 1983). However, they still consider something that looks real on television as real even if it is not (Wright, Huston, Leary Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994). For example, they think that actors on television have those televised professions in real life, and they think that the families in television situation comedies are real families (Howard, 1998).

There are a number of changes in early elementary school children, however, that justify segmenting them as a separate age group. First, the attention span of children in this age group becomes considerably larger. The 3-year-olds are able to concentrate on a single task for an average of only 18 min, and they are easily distracted during this time (Ruff & Lawson,
The development of imaginative play reaches its peak between the ages of 5 and 8 (Fein, 1981). By the age of 3 or 4 years, children’s fantasy play becomes more social. Children increasingly play with other children their age. In addition, their fantasy play develops from loose fragments into complex plots. Between 5 and 7 years of age, children can enjoy the most elaborated forms of social imaginative play (Valkenburg & Hellendoorn, 1992). They also develop a preference for more adventurous themes in their imaginative play and entertainment programs, such as those with locations in foreign countries or in outer space (Valkenburg & Hellendoorn, 1992).

During the early elementary school years, children also develop a preference for more fast-paced entertainment. They often find slower-paced programs with friendly characters and familiar contexts boring or childish (Acuff, 1997; Sheldon & Loncar, 1996). Because they are able to make sense of far more information, they show persistence with content that is more difficult to understand (Anderson & Burns, 1991). They also become more responsive to verbally oriented information and entertainment, more complicated characters, and more sophisticated forms of humor (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981).

Children around age 5 increasingly make independent purchases. The first independent purchase is usually performed in a supermarket or department store together with the parent (McNeal, 1992). Valkenburg’s (1999) survey reported that 54% of 4-year-olds and 74% of 5-year-olds had already made a purchase in the presence of a parent. Children between the ages of 5 and 7 also start to make purchases and independent store visits without their parents. The first independent store visit is usually a convenience store or a retail outlet close to home (McNeal, 1992). According to Valkenburg (1999), 21% of 5-year-olds, 35% of the 7-year-olds, and 48% of 8-year-olds had already made an independent purchase without a parent present.

5. Later elementary school (age 8–12): conformity and fastidiousness

In the period of ages 8–12, the opinions of peers play an increasingly important role. This is also the period in which children’s eye for detail and quality develops, and thereby, their ability to critically evaluate and compare products and information. In contrast to preschool and early elementary school children, 8–12-year-old children have fantasies that more often entail realistic and plausible themes. In this period, children develop a sincere interest in real-world phenomena (Mielke, 1983), and they can be highly critical of entertainment and commercials that lack realism (Acuff, 1997; Gunter, McAleer, & Clifford, 1991). They continue to like animals, but they are mainly interested in real-life animals (Mielke, 1983). Because most fantasy characters have been demystified (Fernie, 1981), children in this age group tend to become attached to real-life heroes, such as sports heroes, movie stars, and realistic action heroes (Acuff, 1997).

With the developing ability to decenter, children come to appreciate details. As discussed earlier, children in previous age groups may focus on one striking detail of a toy or a character. For the 8–12-year-old child, many characteristics of a toy may be carefully
observed, from the face and body to details of the doll’s clothing to how it moves (Acuff, 1997). At this age, children become progressively critical of entertainment of low quality, such as those that are poorly produced or repetitious (Gunter et al., 1991). They are no longer content with simple, salient characteristics, such as a colorful cartoon character. Unlike younger children, who are greatly impressed by special effects and characters with special powers, older children seem to agree that special effects by themselves are not enough (Gunter et al., 1991).

Their emergent eye for detail and quality also explains why some children in this age group develop a preference for collecting objects, such as dolls or cards of their heroes. Whereas, younger children may also show a tendency toward collecting, their “collecting” is usually more a matter of “accumulating” (Acuff, 1997, p. 72). Many younger children simply like to gather many toys around them. By the age of 7 or 8, however, children start to collect with the aim of making distinctions between the different objects (Acuff, 1997) and also with an eye toward the opportunity for social interaction that collecting may offer.

Another characteristic of children in the later elementary school years is that their ability to recognize and interpret others’ emotions improves rapidly. By age 4 or 5, children can provide explanations for why their playmates are happy, angry, or sad, although they tend to rely primarily on visible cues, such as facial expressions (Flavell et al., 1993). As children rely more and more on both internal and external cues to interpret emotions, they improve greatly in their understanding of emotions. For example, they eventually recognize that more than one emotion can be experienced at the same time, and that an emotion can be feigned (Flavell et al., 1993). By this age, therefore, children start to recognize, criticize, and dislike poor acting by protagonists in entertainment programs and commercials (Sheldon & Loncar, 1996).

Peer interactions become increasingly sophisticated among older elementary school children (Durkin, 1997). Because children in this age group develop such a strong sense of commitment and loyalty to the norms of their peer group, they are increasingly sensitive to the thoughts, opinions, judgments, and evaluations of other children, and become very sensitive to what is “cool” and what is “in.” They therefore become alert to how to behave in public and how to avoid being ridiculed with respect to what they wear and even what they prefer to watch on television. For example, older children feel the need to firmly demonstrate their aversion to programs designed for younger children or for shows that feature characters younger than they are (Mielke, 1983).

By the time children are 9–10-years-old, they start to lose interest in toys and develop a preference for products with a social function, such as music and sports equipment (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). At this time, they are also primarily interested in products and entertainment designed for adults (Buijzen & Valkenburg, in press; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989).

Children’s requests for advertised products decrease by 9 or 10 as well (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). Not only do children become more critical about media offerings, their sensitivity to peer influences is at its peak in this period (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). It is possible that the norms and values that are created in particular peer groups function as a filter for other consumer socializing forces, including advertising.
Because of their increased loyalty to brand names and their increased negotiation strategies, children’s influence on household purchases further increases in this period. According to McNeal (1992), by the age of 9 or 10, nearly all children are visiting different types of stores and making purchases on their own several times a week. Although children’s consumer behavior continues to develop during adolescence and adulthood, by age 12, children have become acquainted with all aspects of their consumer behavior, at least in a rudimentary form. Typically, they are able to (1) feel wants and preferences (as early as infancy and toddlerhood); (2) search to fulfill them (as early as the preschool period); (3) make a choice and a purchase (from the early elementary school period on); and (4) evaluate a product and its alternatives (as early as the later elementary school period).

6. Suggestions for future research

Most research on children’s consumer behavior has been conducted by marketing researchers (Kline, 1993). Although these researchers have gathered a wealth of knowledge about children’s consumer behavior, their methods and findings are, for economic reasons, often not accessible to the academic world. In academic circles, there has been little systematic research on the different determinants of children’s consumer behavior. Many academic studies have been published on the behavioral effects of advertising, but only a few have investigated the development of consumer behavior in a wider context. Moreover, most of the academic studies that have focused on a broader spectrum of determinants of children’s consumer behavior were conducted in the 1970s (e.g., Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979).

There are several changes in the child’s environment, however, that call for a revitalization of research on children’s consumer socialization. First, as discussed earlier, the child-rearing and communication styles of today’s families have changed significantly from those employed in the early 1970s. Anecdotal observations suggest that children may now be more “sophisticated” in their consumer behavior than were their comparison cohorts from earlier generations (Cram & Ng, 1999), but there is currently no academic evidence to support such claims.

Second, consumer organizations throughout the world have noted increasing commercial pressures on children (e.g., Murray & Westendorp, 1996). Commercial children’s programs in the Netherlands, for example, include more than 25 child-targeted television commercials every hour during the Christmas period (Valkenburg, 1999). Many new marketing techniques, such as those using the Internet, kids’ clubs, and telemarketing, are increasingly aimed at the child consumer and have the potential to disrupt the privacy of the family (see Turow, this volume).

Because of the wide range of commercial messages meticulously targeted to specific segments of the child audience, children seem to have become less dependent on their parents in learning about consumer values. It is possible that entertainment and advertising aimed at young children shortens the period during which parents are the primary socializing force in the lives of their children. Although today’s children and adolescents have the spending
power to utilize their consumer skills, they still often lack the maturity to think carefully about buying decisions. Media literacy research is needed to understand how children and adolescents can be taught to make thoughtful consumer decisions, as well as how to protect them from commercial pressures to buy quickly and impulsively.

Research on children’s consumer behavior has typically been based on one of two types of theoretical models of human learning: cognitive-developmental models and socialization models (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Studies based on cognitive-developmental models have primarily investigated differences between younger and older children in responses to advertising (e.g., Rubin, 1974; Wartella & Ettema, 1974). Studies conducted within the socialization perspective have attempted to explain children’s consumer socialization as a function of environmental influences (e.g., Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979).

Socialization studies often seem to have been guided by a simple stimulus–response perspective, where exposure to a socializing agent (e.g., advertising) directly influences children’s consumer attitudes. However, a basic assumption in modern theories of media effects is that children are active and motivated explorers of what they encounter in the media (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000). Another assumption is that any media effect on children is enhanced, channeled, or mitigated by what the child makes of the message (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999). In order to understand media effects on children, then, it is crucial to gain insight into the different antecedents of children’s exposure to different media.

In the consumer socialization literature to date, too few attempts have been undertaken to explore the dynamic elements of child variables in the socialization process. Future research should be derived from more elaborated theoretical models, in which different environmental agents (e.g., media exposure, parent and peer influence, and family communication patterns) and child factors (e.g., gender, developmental level, and interests and tastes that motivate exposure) operate as interacting determinants of children’s developing consumer behavior.

In conclusion, future research on children’s consumer socialization should try to integrate the different theoretical perspectives that have been used in previous studies. In addition, there is a need for historical, longitudinal, and cross-national research to investigate and compare the marketing efforts aimed at children in “new” and “old” media, parental attitudes about consumerism, and family communication patterns about consumer values and behavior.

References


