Reverse Socialization: A Myth or Reality?  
A study on technology related products and services

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ABSTRACT

In the context of consumer theory, reverse socialization refers to secondary socialization where the adult consumers update their skills, attitude and behaviour in order to make efficient consumption choices in a dynamic world. The paper examines the process of reverse socialization in which a younger person teaches an older person. Data were collected from adolescents through an unstructured interview and analysed using the protocol of phenomenology. The study finds out how reverse socialization happens and what are the methods used by the children in transferring the knowledge. It concludes that the escalation of informational role played by the younger generation leads to the parental consumer learning from the children.

Introduction

Radical changes have been taking place in the market for goods and services during recent times on account of unprecedented technological advancements and escalating competition. Concurrently, we also find fundamental shifts in the family structure as well as in the levels of exposure of children to the developments in the market. One can say with confidence that two decades back, as far as consumption choices of children were concerned, Indian parents were exercising a good deal of decision making and influencing role. However, at present, we find that children exercise an entirely different relationship with their parents. In many shopping situations, one can readily observe that, compared to their parents, children have relatively superior knowledge regarding technical and functional aspects of products and their operations. This unique state of affairs has given rise to a novel consumer socialization paradigm wherein children, by coincidence, acquire the role of knowledge and information providers for their parents.

Consumer socialization is the process by which young people develop consumer related skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning in the market place (Ward, 1974). Majority of consumer socialization studies focus on the depiction of parent child socialization, the child learns from the parents and the influence primarily flows from the parents to the child. The dyadic model explains the role of family as a dominant socialization agent from them the child learns the consumption skills. In the recent changes and the same is acquired from their own products on a day to day basis. Parents who are either homemakers or who do not use computers in their jobs are likely to have only less knowledge of computers, and as a result, are perhaps more open to children’s contributions in the purchase decision making process as well as in the use and maintenance of these products.

Background of the Study

The advancement in science and technology has produced a major shift in family relationships and consumer behaviour. One of the rapidly changing areas is that of information and communication technology. Older consumers would need to adjust their behaviour in order to update themselves on current changes because many products commonly used today did not exist 20 years back. Today’s younger generation, also known as millennium generation, N-generation or digital natives, have greater familiarity with novel consumption ideas. They have also got better opportunities for information acquisition and information processing. The rate of immigration has increased due to global connectivity with far-reaching consequences of enculturation and cultural diffusion. The younger generation, being born into a technologically and culturally integrated society and being exposed to a higher degree of peer influence, has greater flexibility to adapt to these radical technological and cultural changes. Therefore, they are more competent in making objective decisions than their elders when it comes to consumption. In these circumstances, the younger generation acquires a significant role as socialization agents for adult consumers. This is the context of ‘reverse socialization’ where the adult consumers update their skills, attitude and behaviour in order to catch up with the market place realities.

Problem statement

Normally, parents play a dominant role as socialization agents in consumption decisions and there is a downward transmission of knowledge from parents to the children. However, there are certain exceptional situations where parents or the older generation face difficulty in making rational judgments. For example, in the purchase of a smart phone, usually children exhibit greater knowledge because they are well aware of the most modern technologies and for this reason, parents tend to seek their opinion. In such situations, parents are perhaps more open to children’s contributions in the purchase decision making process as well as in the use and maintenance situations.

Today’s tech savvy children possess sophisticated knowledge and skills about products and services and are at home with the advanced technology. They have access to expert knowledge about the recent changes and the same is acquired from their own experience. Therefore, when it comes to consumption, they are capable of taking more balanced decisions than their elders. In such situations children are in a position to act as the secondary socialization agents of their parents. This is the case of reverse socialization in which members of the younger generation teach members of the older generation.

Review of Literature

Zigler and Child (1969) define socialization as a broad term for the whole process by which an individual develops through transaction with other people his specific pattern of socially relevant behaviours and experience. Briefly put, socialization is the way in which the individuals acquire knowledge, values, motives and roles appropriate to their position in a group or a society. An individual can be said to be socialized when he or she has learned to think and feel according to society’s expectations (Moschis, 1987).

Neal (1973) opines that “much consumer behaviour is performed...
under the influence of others. The very foundation of human be-

haviour is learning from others”. Even though consumer sociali-

zation is a lifelong process, majority of consumer behaviour re-

search focuses on consumer socialization of children and few of

the studies focuses on how child influence the parents. However

in actual practice, consumption patterns tend to change over a

person's life cycle; and once they are acquired from parents they

may undergo further formation and change when an individual

deals with real life situations. In general, we find that consumer

socialization research is unidirectional, because it mainly focus-

es on parent to child transmission of knowledge, attitude, skills

and behaviour.

Reverse Socialization

In most of the studies, parents have the socially prescribed role

of teachers while children are viewed as learners. Given the re-

cent developments, it is more realistic to describe consumer

socialization as one in which parents and their children are

both teachers and learners. As such, it important to study not

only how children and adolescents are socialized by their par-
ents, but also how parents learn from their children through a

reciprocal socialization process or through reverse socializa-


by which children may influence their parents' knowledge, skills

and attitudes relating to consumption. Ambert (1992) says that

the phenomenon of reverse socialization is known and docu-

mented, yet we have not generated wide scale empirical work

or innovative and satisfactory conceptual benchmarks regarding

“what children do to their parents.”

Karlijn (2008), points out that the influence of children on their

parents can be divided into two different types, i.e. reciprocal

socialization and yielding. In reverse socialization, children can

be one of the influencers for parental socialization process. Re-

verse intergenerational influence is a form of reciprocal sociali-

zation, in which parents internalize new values, skills, preferenc-

es and roles as taught by their children. This view is supported

by Mittal and Royne (2010). They argued that the younger gen-

eration act as the influencer, while the older generation is the

influenced and this phenomenon is called reverse intergenera-

tional influence which can be classified as reciprocal socializa-

tion and yielding. Othman, (2013) is of the opinion that reverse

influence occur because children possess greater knowledge and

expertise than their parents. This arises because when the chil-

dren grow up they are exposed to new knowledge and the study

reveals that the parents value their knowledge.

The Research Question

To discover whether reverse socialization is prevalent in the

case of technology intensive products and services.

Methodology

The qualitative method of data collection was used. Conveni-

ence samples of 30 children between the ages of 11 to 16 who

were studying in private schools were selected as the respond-

ents. The topic of discussion was the participants’ lived experi-

ence in making elders knowledgeable about the use of technol-

ogy in their day today life. In a personal interview, the subjects

were asked to give a detailed description about their experience,

interesting events, manner in which they transfer knowledge and

the difficulties they faced while socializing their parents.

In the interview the respondents were encouraged by the inter-

viewer to give a full description of the thoughts, feelings, impres-

sions, memories etc along with the narration of the situation in

which it occurred. The transcripts of data were analyzed by us-

ing the protocol of phenomenology since it is the study of expe-

rience.

Findings

Due to the advancement of science and technology, a rapid shift

has occurred in modes of information acquisition, purchase and

consumption. A paperless and timeless method of shopping has

emerged with the help of internet and electronic devices en-

abling us to purchase anything from any part of the world. In

most cases, the parents are not familiar with the use of these so-

phisticated developments. However, today's tech savvy children

are becoming more knowledgeable and strategically sophisticat-

ed in terms of shopping. Due to this, the parents are forced to

seek clarifications from them. In such circumstances, the chil-

dren are able to change their parent's views, attitudes and be-

haviours in order to become more competent to survive in this

changing world.

Children showing how to use the product

In the interviews, the children remarked that their parents as, 'novices' and therefore in need to learn more about the techno-

logically sophisticated products. Most of the children participi-

pated in the interview have demonstrated to their parents as to

how to use the product in question. For example, Ashwin, a 13

year old boy, remarked that he taught his mother how to do the

online booking of gas cylinder. He said “My mum has a smart

phone but she knows only to attend and make the call. I don't

think she is interested in learning more about it. But, when the

gas agency introduced the online booking of LPG cylinder she

asked me to do it. I booked the cylinder and taught her how to
do it. I think, now she is an expert in it when because she got the

SMS from the gas agency, she told that the gas cylinder will be
delivered tomorrow”.

Two third of the respondents who participated in the interview had a similar view. Some of the respondents commented that

as a result of the introduction of online booking of the LPG cy-
dinder, the booking process has become cumbersome. One of the

respondents opined that “my parents are confused with the au-
tomated instructions to press 1, 2, 3 etc. Even though they know
the basic operations, sometimes they press 2 instead of one.
 Sometimes they enter wrong consumer ID”. One of the respond-
ents remarked that “it took time for them to learn a new system;
once they were into the system they can handle it by their own”.

Almost all the respondents in the interview observed that not only that their parents were afraid to try new things, but they were

unwilling to learn new things. Reshma, a 15 year old girl, opines that “my mummy use the microwave oven only for heat-
ing the processed food articles. She never bakes a cake or grills
a food item. One day, I read the instruction book and baked a
cake and a few biscuits. Then, I taught her how to bake these
items. Now, mummy became an expert in using the microwave
oven and she will often cook these food items. Before that she
is afraid to do it”. Another child who participated in the inter-
view said that when the dish antenna was introduced into their
home, the parents were not familiar with its operation. He will

tune the antennae on behalf of their family. Later he taught his
parents how to tune the programmes correctly by reading the
user manual.

More than 75% of the respondents were of the opinion that their parents sought their advice in using various technology related

products and services like WhatsApp, Skype, Microsoft office,

internet etc. They said that in the actual buying situations of

electronic gadgets also their parents sought their guidance in

respect of product, brand and features so that they could be

confident enough to buy the product. This is because “we usu-

ally will have a detailed look into the pros and cons of the brand.

For this we seek the help of various web sites and read the cus-

omers’ reviews about the product, ask opinion from our peer
groups and watch the advertisements”. All these statements

provide evidence about the information power that children

have and their propensity influence their parents.
Methods used for teaching

Learning is a continuous process. It starts at the birth of the person and ends only when the person dies. In the process of learning, sometimes the younger generation will also act as a teacher by transferring skills and knowledge which is necessary to function in the society as a result of their expert knowledge and the information power. Therefore, it is necessary to know how the children act as a socialization agent or how they teach their parents.

Moschis and Churchill (1978) find that the learner may acquire cognitions and behaviours from the agents through the processes of modelling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Modeling refers to imitating the agent’s behaviour. Here the learner imitates the agents behaviour and learns from them through the process of observation. In certain cases, the child will deliberately demonstrate how to use a product or service. In reinforcement, the behaviour is changed by positive reinforcement that is by reward or negative reinforcement through punishments, negative comments etc. Social interaction means a combination of both modelling and reinforcement.

Millen, a 14 year old respondent, described the method through which he introduced online purchasing into their home. "My family was not at all inclined towards online shopping. I have initiated it into my home by showing the discounts that we can avail by purchasing the items through online shopping. Also, I assured them that not only the quality of the product but also the services offered is excellent. I told them about the possibility of making payment on delivery. Now my mummy will always do online shopping for purchase of electronic items. In fact, I trained her only once how to make the purchase. Now she can do the purchase without my assistance".

Another respondent commented that "my parents will purchase online kurtis from W, Jabong, Mithra etc for me, at the time when the offers are announced. Earlier, I will plead to my parents to do online shopping, but they are unwilling to buy. My mother uses to scold me saying that she cannot waste her hard earned money on untrustworthy purchases. But, once due to my compulsion they have purchased a kurthi through online shopping and experienced the merits of online shopping. Now they are willing to buy anything through online shopping". She added "now my mummy is madly interested in online shopping".

Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that observational learning is prevalent in case of reverse socialization. Anadhuna 16 year old boy commented "I think my parents are shy to seek clarifications from me. Whenever I enter into face book, they observe what I am doing. They will also imitate it. For example when one of my cousins uploaded their wedding photo, I shared that photo and made a comment. Then, in the evening when I logged on to the face book, I saw that my mummy has also shared that photo".

In reinforcement the child maintains control over the situations. Usually positive reinforcement where used by the child because in a collectivist culture we give importance to the hierarchy of relationships. If negative reinforcement is given by the child, sometimes it may lead to a psychological reactance where the parents become unwilling to change. For example, one of the respondents said that "I told my mum to use WhatsApp instead of using SMS because it is free of cost. But my mummy responded "I know what to do. It is none of your business". In the case of positive reinforcement, the child is reinforcing the parent’s behaviour in order to make their parents fit to live in the ever changing and dynamic society.

Words, they acted as the socialization agents of their parents in the case of use and maintenance situations of smart phone. One of the respondents stated that "my mother was ignorant about the operations of touch phone. I explained to her how to use the smart phone. Then I unlocked the window and moved on to the settings and showed her how she can use each and every app available in the phone. I showed her how to make a call, how to surf in the internet, how to take a photo, how to take the video, how to check mail, WhatsApp, face book etc. Then I asked her to try all these by herself. I sat with her and taught her how to use it. Whenever she committed a mistake I will help her rectify it. I will congratulate and praise her all the times when she does it appropriately".

Alka, a 15 year old girl, commented that her mother would watch whenever she logs on to the face book. She watches what I do and learned how to use the face book. Then, one day she created her own account. Now she has more friends than what I have. Whenever she faces some difficulty she asks me or my brother for assistance. Now she has her own page for selling the fancy items she makes. She will also obtain online orders. This is the typical example of social interaction where the combination of modelling and reinforcement takes place.

Discussion

The study examines whether the adolescents transfer knowledge to their parents and how they teach their parents. From the study we conclude that the presence of reverse socialization is evident in the case of technology intensive products. The younger generation acts as a socialization agent due to their expert knowledge and information power. As a result of these powers they are in a position to transfer knowledge as well.

In order to identify how they transfer knowledge to their parents, the agent learner relationship method used by Moschis in the model of consumer socialization was adopted. The study finds that modelling and reinforcement are the most common methods used in the socialization process. In a collectivist country like India, the children are more likely to use positive reinforcement techniques. Most of the children participated in the study are of the opinion that observational learning is prevalent in the case of reverse socialization.

Generally, in socialization studies, parents are considered as dominant socialization agents. Family has a direct and indirect role in the consumer socialization of the children and majority of the socialization and consumer behaviour studies focuses on a downward transmission of knowledge from parents to the children. In the changing scenario there is a bi-directional flow of knowledge and information which means, the younger generation tend to acquire a significant role as socialization agents for adult consumers.
REFERENCES