

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



Management

KEYWORDS : Adolescents, Knowledge, learning, Reverse socialization.

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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 socializing agent from them the child learns the consumption skills. In the 21st century, due to the peculiar shifts in the market as well as in the nature of access to information, there is a bi-directional flow of knowledge i.e. from parent to child (downward transmission) and also the upward transmission of knowledge from child to parent.

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 decision making process.

In the case of technology intensive products such as computers, mobile phones and electronic gadgets, children usually tend to possess relatively superior knowledge regarding the functions and operations of the product because they encounter and use these 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 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 behaviour is learning from others". Even though consumer socialization is a lifelong process, majority of consumer behaviour research 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 focuses 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 recent 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 parents, but also how parents learn from their children through a reciprocal socialization process or through reverse socialization. Ward (1974) defines "Reverse Socialization," as a process 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 documented, 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. Reverse intergenerational influence is a form of reciprocal socialization, in which parents internalize new values, skills, preferences and roles as taught by their children. This view is supported by Mittal and Royné (2010). They argued that the younger generation act as the influencer, while the older generation is the influenced and this phenomenon is called reverse intergenerational influence which can be classified as reciprocal socialization 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 children 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. Convenience samples of 30 children between the ages of 11 to 16 who were studying in private schools were selected as the respondents. The topic of discussion was the participants' lived experience in making elders knowledgeable about the use of technology 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 interviewer to give a full description of the thoughts, feelings, impressions, memories etc along with the narration of the situation in which it occurred. The transcripts of data were analyzed by using the protocol of phenomenology since it is the study of experience.

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 enabling us to purchase anything from any part of the world. In most cases, the parents are not familiar with the use of these sophisticated developments. However, today's tech savvy children are becoming more knowledgeable and strategically sophisticated in terms of shopping. Due to this, the parents are forced to seek clarifications from them. In such circumstances, the children are able to change their parent's views, attitudes and behaviours 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 technologically sophisticated products. Most of the children participated 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 how to do it. I think, now she is an expert in it because when 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 cylinder, the booking process has become cumbersome. One of the respondents opined that "my parents are confused with the automated 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 respondents 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 heating 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 interview 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 usually 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 customers' 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. Modelling 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 showed 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. Anadhu a 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.

More than half of the students participated in the interview had the opinion that they assumed the role of teachers or in other

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 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.

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