

An Examination of the Consumer Buying Behaviour of Single-Parent Households

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With the rise in single-parent families, there is a need to determine whether there is a resulting change in family consumer behaviour and if marketers need to alter their strategies accordingly. The methodology used was a literature search on single parent families. Some of the interesting findings emerging from the literature review were that the single-mother family was the second most common type in the US; single mothers and married mothers behaved similarly in their buying behaviours, however single mothers took their children shopping more frequently; single mothers and single fathers were very different when it comes to product choice regarding food and beverages; children of single parents had more influence in the decision-making process than children of dual parents. They also shopped for the family more often; Working single parents and dual earners showed a similar behaviour when it came to grocery shopping and using convenience foods. Unemployed single parents differed to both in their buying behaviour; Single-parent families valued certain products more highly than intact families, such as holidays, traditions and family pets. It was concluded that the change in consumer behaviour due to the increase in single-parent families was minimal and inconsistent. Rather, there were similarities amongst members of the same socioeconomic class, rather than family type. Marketers would be unwise to adjust their strategies until more conclusive evidence is discovered. Instead, marketers could look at segmenting the group based on socioeconomic factors, particularly employment status as well as the quality of inter-family relationships.

Track: Marketing

Introduction

With the rise in single-parent families, there is a need to determine whether there is a resulting change in family consumer behaviour and if marketers need to alter their strategies accordingly. There is no doubt that the number of single-parent households has greatly increased in a relatively short period of time. After studying available research on this trend, we endeavoured to find whether this had resulted in a distinct change in consumer behaviour.

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Methodology

To achieve this research objective, the methodology adopted was a literature search on all family types – single-parent, intact and blended. We also studied the roles of family members in the buying process, as well as product choices and shopping habits in past literature. Quantitative data as well as qualitative data in the literature were studied to better determine the intention as well as the result. The study would help to determine if marketers need to adjust their strategies for single-parent households.

Literature Review Findings

The rise in single-parent households has been recognised for many years. After the 1990 Current Population Survey conducted in the USA, Kossack (1992) noted that despite only a modest rise in income in the previous twenty years, the share of the consumer market taken by single-parent families rose considerably. Further, there were more single households in the US than married households with children (Smith 2004) and singles account for 42% of the workforce, 40% of homebuyers and 35% of voters. In 2006, the single-mother family was the second most common family type in the US (Chaudhury and Hyman, 2009) and it is these statistics that have led to further research examining the consumer behaviour of single-parent families.

Numerous studies have outlined the differences in decision making between different family types and the influence of children in the buying process. However, these studies have typically examined direct influence and have largely ignored indirect influence and specific sub-decisions (Quester et al., 2007, p432). Thus, they have mainly been outcome-focused and have not examined the nonlinear perspective of exchange of information between family members. Chaudhury and Hyman (2009) proposed that further research be conducted into the following four areas: children's vested interest in purchases; child's shopping knowledge; parenting style; and relevance of gender-role orientation. This process-oriented perspective is proposed to highlight the resources, norms and interactions of single-mother families that moderate decision-making processes (Chaudhury and Hyman, 2009).

Roles in the Buying Process

Obtaining accurate data regarding children's influence on buying decisions can be challenging, as a child's perspective may differ from that of their parent. A child may believe that they are more involved in decision-making than they actually are, due to a parent's subtle influence or narrowing of choices (Tinson, Nancarrow, Brace, 2008). Also, the term "single-parent household", as opposed to that of "traditional" or "intact" household can become blurred due to varying degrees of cohabitation and thus how research respondents define themselves. It would appear then that three distinct family types have emerged – intact, single-parent and blended (step-parent families).

The category of intact families can be further divided into traditional and modern types. A traditional family type is one with two parents and one or more children. Generally the father is the primary income earner and thus holds the majority of influence in family buying decisions. The role of the mother, however, has undergone enormous changes in recent years, incorporating a higher level of education, full-time employment and a career focus. These changes have led to a higher level of contribution to household resources by the mother and, presumably, more influence, giving rise to the modern household.

Lee and Beatty (2002) tested this theory by direct observation of 89 families living in Auckland, New Zealand. Further, they hypothesised that children from modern families would exert a greater influence on buying decisions than those from traditional families. Results showed that the mother's influence grew according to her occupational status. However, this influence was mainly in the configuration stage, along with the father. It is believed that, by setting the ground rules in the early stages of decision-making, it makes it possible to defer to the rest of the household at the outcome stage. Interestingly, these results also showed an increase in the influence of older children in families where the mother does not work outside the home. This influence is so high that it almost equals that of both the mother and father at the outcome stage.

Conversely, Tinson, Nancarrow and Brace (2008) studied the general shopping habits of mothers with children from all three family types – intact, single and blended. They found that the children's level of involvement in purchasing decisions was proportional to the number of familial relationships. Children of single mothers (often the simplest relationships) were more involved in the decision-making process than intact families, with children of blended families having the least. This is believed to be due to the more complex familial relationships and a greater number of people to satisfy. Interestingly, this same study found that children in blended families tend to be most involved in the final outcome only when it concerns treats for themselves.

Similarly, Mangleburg, Grewal and Bristol (1999), found that teens in blended households had considerably less influence than teens in single-parent families. This is also attributed to the complex family relationships in the blended family as well as a possible lack of cohesion. It would be expected that single-parent families show a greater level of cooperation and cohesion, as well as simpler relationships that would lead to children having a greater voice in purchase decisions.

The hypothesis that the children's influence on decisions was related to the amount of parental coalition within the family could be seen to be proven. Obviously, there was expected to be less coalition and authoritarianism in the single-parent families than the intact ones. However, this result is inconclusive due to the author's admission of only taking the parent's

perspective during this study, rather than observing the actual behaviour (Mangleburg, Grewel and Bristol, 1999).

Most studies such as these, have focused on direct influence and have largely ignored indirect influence. In most family decisions, there is input by all members and any resulting decision is usually based considering all viewpoints. The example that Quester, Neal and Petittgrew (2007) give us is that a mother might be grocery shopping and buy the brands that she thinks her family would like rather than her own preference.

However, despite these indirect influences, it is important to note that, despite the family type, women make the majority of purchases today. In fact, women make 88% of all retail purchases in America according to Kanner (2004, p. 5). They buy 53% of all stocks, 51% of all sports equipment, 66% of all PC's and 51% of consumer electronics, 47% of hardware and DIY materials, 85% of toilet tissue, 81% of groceries, 75% of over the counter drugs, 90% of greeting cards, 94% of home furnishings, 46% of menswear, 60% of flowers, 65% of all cars and 80% of healthcare.

Product choices between family types

There have been many recent studies on the consumer habits of single-parent families in comparison with dual parent households. The majority of these studies have focused on food consumption. The rise in ill health and obesity in children of single-parents has led researchers to study the differing food choices between family types. It was therefore expected that single-parents would spend more on convenience foods. Interestingly, Ahuja and Walker (1994) found that this wasn't the case at all, with positive results in only 3 out of 28 statistical tests. In fact, in 4 out of the 28 tests, dual parent households used more convenience food items.

Claims were then made that, as convenience items could be considered more costly, regular usage by single income families would be inhibited. Frazao (1993) noted that nearly a third of single-parent households were poor; one in every three had incomes below the poverty threshold. When she divided these families into poor and nonpoor households, the poor certainly spent less on food. However, nonpoor single-parent households actually spent more on food per person than dual-parent ones.

Clearly, there would appear to be a link between family income and expenditure. When examining consumption habits based on employment status, we find that families where all parents are employed, irrespective of family structure, spend a greater portion of their food budget on convenience foods (Ziol-Guest, DeLeire and Kalil, 2006). It is believed that married dual-earner families would be under the same time constraints as employed single-parents, thus the need for convenience foods.

Conversely, Thiagarajan, Chakrabarty, Lueg and Taylor (2007), claim that single-parents should be targeted by convenience products or services as

they could be seen to be a lucrative market. They claim, however, that this is not due to time constraints but rather on role-ambiguity. As single-parents, particularly employed ones, roles can encompass mother, father, employee etc. Offering products that can assist to fulfil these various roles could be seen as attractive to single-parents. Interestingly, Ziol-Guest et al. (2006) also found that single mothers and fathers differ from each other in almost all categories of food and beverage expenditure. It would therefore be inappropriate to group these consumers as a single market segment.

Buying Environment between Family Types

Rather than examining product choices in the various family types, other research has focused on changes in the attitudes and behaviour of members of single-parent families. While the behaviour of single mothers and married mothers was found to be very similar, there was a marked change in the behaviour of the children (Ahuja, Capella and Taylor, 2001). The children of single mothers, particularly the oldest, were found to shop alone for the family at three times the rate of children with married mothers. Also, shopping as a family was three times more likely in single mother households than married ones.

Ahuja, Capella and Taylor (2001), conclude that the similarities in the buying behaviour of single and married mothers is due to certain adjustment strategies that are made by all mothers, single or married, to accomplish their shopping tasks. This would link with Kanner's observation (2004, p5) that women make the majority of purchases, single or otherwise. In single-parent families, children could be expected to make the moderate purchases that a father in dual-parent families would.

Further, Ahuja Capella and Taylor (2001), speculated that the difference in the buying role of children between the family types could well link with the Thiagarajan, Chakrabarty, Lueg and Taylor (2007) study that showed how single-mothers deal with role ambiguity: by taking her children shopping with her or by delegating this task to her older children, a single-mother is coordinating both of her roles as mother and grocery shopper.

The factor of behaviour/attitude in the buying process has also been highlighted in a change in product purchases between family types. Divorced or widowed parents seem to value certain experiences more than married parents (Bates and Gentry, 1994). Often these parents choose to continue living as they did when married. Rituals and traditions remained important, even more so, perhaps due to the parent's wish to have consistency in their children's lives.

On the other hand, there also seemed to be a desire to move forward and create new experiences amongst single-parent families (Bates and Gentry, 1994). New family pets, day trips and holidays, even eating out became new traditions and would subsequently alter consumer behaviour. This could well support Ahuja and Walker's (1994) surmise that an increase in the usage of

fast food restaurants among single-parents could be explained by a parent's desire to eat as a family. Often, this may only be achieved by eating out.

Discussion

While much research dedicated to this area has determined similar results, there is also a great deal of conflicting findings. This is evident in particular with food-based studies, which could be self-limiting. These studies were necessary, however, with the link between children in poorer health being a member of a single-parent family. It was believed that children in single-parent families would have a lower nutritional intake than dual-parent ones. To prove this, Zioli-Guest, DeLeire and Kalil (2006), found quite similar behaviour between the two, except that single-parents spent less of their food budget on fruit and vegetables. However, Ahuja and Walker (1994) found that, while single-parents used fast food restaurants slightly more, they actually used convenience products less.

When Frazao (1993) noted that one-third of single-parent families lived below the poverty line, she further categorised them as poor and nonpoor. The nonpoor single-parent household actually spent more per person on food than dual-parent households. This conflicts with previous Government studies in the US, which indicate that single-parent households spend less per person for food than do other households.

Researchers agree, however, on a number of issues. It has been determined that there is very little difference in the shopping behaviour of mothers, single or married (Ahuja, Capella and Taylor, 2001). It was highlighted, however, that there was a distinct change in the behaviour of the children in these families. This was also supported by Tinson, Nancarrow and Brace (2008) who hypothesised that children in single-parent families would have greater involvement in purchasing decisions due to the simpler familial relationships.

The factors of income and employment have been noted by many researchers as influencing consumer behaviour in families. For this reason, Zioli-Guest, DeLeire and Kalil (2006), strictly controlled these variables as well as geography to arrive at their results. Although by monitoring the change in these variables, particularly employment status, Lee and Beatty (2002) found that a woman's influence on purchase decisions increases in direct proportion to her job status. Thus, mothers who do not work away from the home have considerable less input than those that do. Also, we see very similar buying behaviour in both employed single-parents and dual-earners who would have similar time-constraints.

Directions for future research

Research to date has not been conclusive that single-parent families could be defined as a typical market segment. In fact, the opposite appears to be true. Members of this segment actually relate closer to those in their own socio-economic group than with each other. More research needs to be conducted

to determine if the greater influence is related to income or employment/education status. Also, with the rise in non-traditional households, marketers should perhaps look at family size rather than family type when conducting research. In Australia, the number of childless households is now 38% and increasing (Schiffman et al. 2005, p320). Added to the increase in single-parent families, marketers should be looking at capturing these smaller households. Finally, the quality of family relationships needs to be examined, although this poses quite a challenge. It would appear that both roles in the buying process, as well as product choice could vary according to inter-family relationships.

Conclusion

After examining the evidence, it is clear that there is little or no difference in the consumer behaviour of parents of single family households and those of dual parents households. The greatest change, in fact, is in the behaviour of the children. While this could be due to family type, there is similar research suggesting that it could be due to the quality of family relationships (Tinson, Nancarrow and Brace, 2008). This same factor could well combine with the socioeconomic factors such as education and income that we have seen to affect the consumer behaviour of families of all types. That is, parents with a higher level of education and social awareness would wish to educate their children accordingly and involve them in buying decision-making. This would concur with the Chaudhury and Hyman's (2009) proposal that further research be conducted into the following four areas: children's vested interest in purchases, child's shopping knowledge, parenting style and relevance of gender-role orientation. Based on the above studies, it would be unwise for marketers to diversify their programmes to cater for different family types. In fact Bradford Fay (1993, p. 7) tells us that "Given that most Americans have lived the "married-with-children" lifestyle, are living it now, or will live it in the future, marketers should still consider it a fundamental part of most Americans' values and aspirations."

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