

CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN IN LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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Abstract

This study investigates whether and how children's and their mother's proneness to consumption would affect children's liking for shopping in low-income families. The expectation is that children would be directly affected from their mothers' orientation towards consumption and shopping. A survey was employed in low-income households to 126 children attending primary school and their mothers. Results imply that mothers play a direct role in shaping children's orientation towards consumption. More specifically, children's own consumption orientation would increase their liking for shopping. Mothers' proneness to consumption, however, directly mediates this relationship. These results are discussed along with theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: consumer socialization, low-income families, child consumers, consumption proneness

1. INTRODUCTION

In his famous book "Shopping, Place and Identity", Miller (1998) points out that children may express their growing sense of autonomy through shopping. In line with this argument, statistics illustrate a dramatic increase in children's market. For instance, the average number of items per person in the children's apparel segment is about nine pieces, and the revenue in this segment amounts to \$268 billion in the U.S. (Statista, 2023). Other research finds that children have started to influence their parent's shopping decisions and make independent purchases at very early ages (Hanna, 2023). While constituting a fast-growing market, children's elevated inclusion in the shopping context and businesses targeting them for commercial purposes raise concerns.

In this study, we are interested in the social and cultural perspective of children as consumers (Flurry, 2007), more than the cognitive development of children as rational decision makers (John, 1999). Literature mostly assumes that consumer socialization takes place in families with sufficient economic and social resources, where consumer socialization would remain as a problem of the parents' appropriate way of teaching (which is itself mediated by the market system) and/or as the problem of the child in question. Aside from the discussion of social class and the family life cycle, we expect that a similar transfer of consumption-related attitude would happen in low-income families as well. The principle that the mother works as an intermediary between the market and the child is likely to remain the same, although the specific attitudes and related behavior types may differ. This study is an attempt to understand and test whether a similar transfer of consumption tendencies exists among low-income families.

In-line with this research goal, the present study concentrates on low-income families and their consumption orientation to explore the potential influence on their children's shopping attitudes. More specifically, we investigate whether and how children's and their mother's proneness for consumption would affect children's liking for shopping. The relevant literature is discussed below, leading to our hypotheses.

1.1. Consumer Socialization and Mothers

Research suggests that parental guidance is very important in shaping children's consumption values and habits (Thaichon, 2017), hence the word "socialization" of children through learning how to consume right in a society (Quintal et al., 2016). In this process, children acquire the skills relevant to their performance as consumers in the marketplace. One of the socialization agents in this regard are the parents (Davis and McGinnis, 2016), through advice (Feenstra et al., 2015) or through co-shopping (Blackwell et al., 2000). Children have increasingly been targeted by advertising and by point-of-sale

stimuli (Mau et al., 2016) so they are largely conceptualized as “in-progress” learners, who need guidance and supervision from their parents.

Studies have found that children are strongly immersed in the family’s social norms and may try to understand and attain the required consumption-related knowledge to look good in the eyes of their parents (Gram and Gronhoj, 2016). Mothers are one of the most important influencers on children’s consumption-related socialization process. For example, mother-daughter dyad is perceived to be critical for the success of the U.S. retail industry. It is safe to assume that children learn to behave in accordance with the expectations of their family and society regarding consumption of various items available in the market. We claim further that children’s love for shopping may also stem from their parents’ (and more specifically, mothers’) orientation towards shopping. Therefore, our first two hypotheses reflect the effect of children’s and their mothers’ proneness to consumption on how much children would like shopping.

Hypothesis 1: Children like shopping more when they are more prone to consumption.

Hypothesis 2: Children like shopping more when their mothers are more prone to consumption.

In the above hypotheses, consumption proneness is conceptualized as the level of need an individual feels for consumption items to feel better or to reach some goals. Several studies point out that parents share their shopping activities with their children, so throughout this process, both parents and their children may become more or less oriented towards consumption as a field of joy and happiness. They may develop interest in different items, different places, and even different marketing stimuli (Rust, 1993). They may also build, maintain, or modify their self-concepts using consumption items and brand meanings (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967).

We further argue that the mother’s consumption proneness would be a stronger determinant in this process. Mothers would like their children to learn and behave in “appropriate” manners in a supermarket, for instance, as a sign that the child learn the “appropriate” consumption behavior (Barnard et al., 1977). Therefore, our third hypothesis is formed as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Mothers’ consumption proneness acts as a mediator between children’s consumption proneness and their liking for shopping.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used survey methodology to understand the effects of mothers’ consumption orientation on children. We focused on children who attend primary school, so our sample consists of children between the ages of 6 and 12. This age group is specifically highlighted in other studies due to their high rates of exposure to online and other stimuli (Thaichon, 2017). Questionnaires were conducted using a face-to-face approach. Considering the low education levels and the difficulty children and their mothers would experience in understanding the survey procedures, one of the authors engaged in on-site survey trips around different regions in Turkey, more specifically, Ankara and Mersin. We surveyed a total of 126 mothers with low-income, low-education and their children. The results are presented below. Ethical consent was obtained from TOBB University of Economics and Technology (#2022-08).

2.1. Sample Characteristics

The sampling strategy was snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) since it was challenging to meet and convince families about our research. We applied the following principles throughout the study: (1) Parents should have low-to-medium level of income, which is assumed to be around the minimum wage of 5.000 Turkish Liras at the time of data collection (around 185 US dollars with today’s currency rate); (2) Children should be between 6 and 12 years old, attending primary school; and (3) Both parents should be alive and married, in order to make similar comparisons. The sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1 below. It is noticeable that low-income families level of education is also relatively lower.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Age Mean (Stand. Dev.)	Gender	Income Mean	Education
Child	11.5 (2.02)	%44 Female	-	All primary school students
Mother	38.62 (5.78)	Female	957 TL (%67 has no income)	%13 no formal education %46 primary school %25 secondary school %12 high school %3 college/university %1 graduate school
Father	42.94 (8.98)	Male	3.963 TL (%12 has no income)	%5 no formal education %35 primary school %22 secondary school %28 high school %10 college/university %0 graduate school

2.2. Measurements

Since there are no standard measurements of the chosen variables in this study, we have developed questions from scratch using the relevant literature. The questions and the factor loadings are indicated in Table 2. In factor analyses, we used the Principal Component Analysis as our extraction method and the Varimax method for the rotations. Questions were matched between mothers and children, (except for the word “toys” which was replaced with “household items” for mothers) to make comparable interpretations.

Table 2. Questions and Factor Analyses

CHILD	Consumption Proneness	Content with Life	Like for Shopping
CCP1 My life would be better if I bought more things.	,714		
CCP2 I would be happier if I had nicer things.	,797		
CCP3 I would be a happier person if I afforded more things.	,781		
CCL1 I feel happy.		,760	
CCL2 I am cheerful most of the time.		,779	
CCL3 I feel happy during the day.		,671	
CLP1 I like buying clothes.			,727
CLP2 I like buying <i>toys</i> .			,527

CLP3 I like buying stationary.			,568
CLP4 I like to walk around in the malls.			,667
CLP5 I like shopping.			,818
CLP6 I like supermarkets.			,773
MOTHER	Consumption Proneness	Content with Life	Like for Shopping
MCP1 My life would be better if I bought more things.	,586		
MCP2 I would be happier if I had nicer things.	,702		
MCP3 I would be a happier person if I afforded more things.	,789		
MCL1 I feel happy.		,686	
MCL2 I am cheerful most of the time.		,704	
MCL3 I feel happy during the day.		,692	
MLP1 I like buying clothes.			,649
MLP2 I like buying <i>household items</i> .			,540
MLP3 I like buying stationary.			,429
MLP4 I like to walk around in the malls.			,794
MLP5 I like shopping.			,802
MLP6 I like supermarkets.			,867

Table 2 illustrates the question list and the factor analyses. The questions were grouped under the same categories for both children and their mothers. The first component has three items, showing the level of proneness an individual has towards consumption. A high proneness would indicate that the person feels more satisfied with the consumption items purchased and used. The second component measures whether the individual is generally satisfied with his/her life. This latent-variable is called “content with life” in our study, reflecting whether the individual is happy overall. Lastly, a general liking for shopping is measured, including malls and supermarkets. We asked whether the person likes to walk around, shop, and purchase while shopping. Table 3 illustrates the basic statistics for these variables, and results indicate that all variables are reliable, and they can be used in further analyses.

Table 3. Basic Statistics

<i>Correlation Matrix</i>						
	CCP	MCP	CCL	MCL	CLS	MLS
Child Consumption Proneness	1	,207*	,120	,044	,248**	,108
Mother Consumption Proneness		1	,102	,211*	,251**	,592**
Child Content with Life			1	,093	,191*	,088

Mother Content with Life				1	,044	,319**
Child Like for Shopping					1	,259**
Mother Like for Shopping						1
Number of Items	3	3	3	3	6	6
Reliability (Alpha Score)	0.676	0.686	0.659	0.517	0.787	0.867
Average Sample Value (Std. Dev.)	1.71 (0.80)	2.63 (1.20)	2.03 (0.77)	3.09 (1.60)	1.99 (0.78)	2.68 (1.15)
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).						
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

Since the concepts are quite similar to each other, we also checked whether there is a problem of multicollinearity. The VIF measures revealed no multicollinearity in our data set (highest VIF=1.047).

3. RESULTS

The aim of our first analysis was to understand whether and in what ways children and their mothers might differ in terms of the three variables that we chose to study, namely consumption proneness (CP), content with life (CL), and liking for shopping (LS). We conducted a paired-sample t-test to compare child-mother pairs with each other regarding the three variables. Results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Tests

		Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Err. M.
Pair 1	Child's consumption proneness (CCP)	1,6915	121	,80613	,07328
	Mother's consumption proneness (MCP)	2,6253	121	1,20344	,10940
Pair 2	Child's content with life (CCL)	2,0451	122	,77170	,06987
	Mother's content with life (MCL)	3,0874	122	1,59993	,14485
Pair 3	Child's like for shopping (CLS)	1,9764	122	,78292	,07088
	Mother's like for shopping (MLS)	2,6781	122	1,14881	,10401

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% CI of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CCP - MCP	-,93388	1,30233	,11839	-1,16829	-,69947	-7,888	120	,000
Pair 2	CCL - MCL	-1,04235	1,71012	,15483	-1,34887	-,73583	-6,732	121	,000
Pair 3	CLS - MLS	-,70178	1,21080	,10962	-,91880	-,48475	-6,402	121	,000

Table 4 above shows that children and mothers are different in statistically significant ways. In general, we see that mothers have more proneness for consumption, and they like shopping more compared to their children. Also, mothers seem to be more content with life.

3.1. Hypothesis Testing

In order to understand whether our hypotheses are satisfied in this context, we conducted further tests using IBM SPSS v.26. The first two hypotheses stated that children's and their mothers' consumption proneness would positively affect children's liking for shopping. We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to see whether and to what degree these independent variables affect CLS. Both models are significant ($F_1=7,369$, $p_1\text{-value}<0,008$; $F_2=6,588$, $p_2\text{-value}<0,002$). Table 5 shows the hierarchical regression coefficient table.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Results

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1,574	,162		9,711	,000
CCP	,235	,087	,241	2,715	,008
2 (Constant)	1,287	,201		6,411	,000
CCP	,193	,087	,198	2,219	,028
MCP	,137	,058	,210	2,351	,020

a. Dependent Variable: CLS

Table 5 shows that both variables are quite important for and have a positive and significant effect on children's shopping attitudes. As a result, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are satisfied.

We also wanted to see if mothers' effect on their children's consumption-related values and attitudes are high. For this, we tested Hypothesis 3, which states that mothers' consumption proneness acts as a mediator between children's consumption proneness and their liking for shopping, using the Hayes model 4 (Hayes, 2013). Table 6 below summarizes the results of this analysis.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis (Hayes Model 4)

Y : CLS (Child's Like for Shopping)
X : CCP (Child's Consumption Proneness)
M : MCP (Mother's Consumption Proneness)

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Mother's Consumption Proneness (MCP)

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	,2072	,0429	1,3977	5,3393	1,0000	119,0000	,0226

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2,1021	,2507	8,3860	,0000	1,6057	2,5984
CCP	,3094	,1339	2,3107	,0226	,0443	,5745

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Child's Like for Shopping (CLS)

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	,3169	,1004	,5633	6,5883	2,0000	118,0000	,0019

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	1,2868	,2007	6,4112	,0000	,8894	1,6843
CCP	,1927	,0869	2,2186	,0284	,0207	,3648
MCP	,1368	,0582	2,3509	,0204	,0216	,2521

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****

Direct effect of X on Y

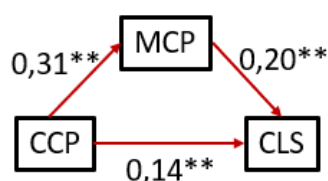
	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
	,1927	,0869	2,2186	,0284	,0207	,3648

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
MCP	,0423	,0263	,0007	,1031

Table 6 shows that there is partial mediation, so Hypothesis 3 is partially satisfied. The significant effect of children's own consumption proneness continues to hold for their shopping attitudes, while at the same time, mothers' consumption proneness acts as a significant mediator (BootLLCI and BootULCI does not contain the zero point in Table 6 above). Figure 1 illustrates this mediation effect more clearly. These results are discussed in the next section.

Figure 1. Test Model



4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study makes three important conclusions: First, children's propensity to consume is likely to result in a more favorable attitude towards shopping. Second, mothers' consumption proneness affects the level of their children's shopping affection. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, mothers' consumption tendencies work as a mediator between their children's consumption propensity and shopping attitudes. In other words, mothers play a direct role in shaping their children's shopping attitudes. The coefficients in Table 6 are all positive, indicating that if the mother likes to consume, the child likes shopping more. The mother becomes an actual facilitator between the child and the marketplace.

It has been claimed that as a couple start to have one or more children, their own spending as a pair decreases (Browning and Ejrnaes, 2009). With this decrease in consumption, mothers may become more alert to consumption opportunities and develop more proneness towards consumption prospects. In this

transition, they may also see shopping and mall visits as an opportunity to explore the world, and with scarce resources, they may transfer this “potential joy” from consumption onto their children. This study has also shown that mothers can play a positive role in “training” their children in low-income families. When the person becomes less able to purchase items from the market, she or he may become more “prone” towards consumption since the potential fulfilment from shopping is not yet satisfied. The (cultural) interplay between the market and the person (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and the consumption literacy a person develops may make the child open to his or her mother’s guidance and direction about whether and how to consume.

These theoretical deductions have business-related and public-related implications. Previous research points out that children may be ignored as consumer agents or be treated as nuisances in a co-shopping experience, but other strategies to either capitalize on children as influencers or contribute to their socialization (Grossbart et al., 1991) may prove to be more helpful both for mothers and children. Some training sessions and intervention programs can be organized by the government and non-governmental organizations to turn both mothers and their children into more “competent” consumers. This may be especially important in poor families where parents make more sacrifices to ensure their children are not stigmatized (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006).

The findings from the present study should be taken with caution due to several limitations. The chosen variables reflect only one perspective, leaving several other important factors out of discussion, such as the age and gender of the child, personality characteristics of the mother, as well as the situational and cultural elements, including the shopping environment, brand interventions, and group effects. In addition, our sample does not capture the heterogeneity among the poor families and mother-child pairs throughout the world, therefore more research in different countries using other criteria for defining “the poor” is needed. Future studies can take further steps to understand the underlying factors in the relationship identified in Figure 1. For instance, the proneness for consumption may be further diagnosed to include its subdimensions, such as consumption literacy and the level of joy associated with shopping. In addition, the actual relationship between the mother and the child may determine a base for understanding how this relationship turns into a marketing-mentorship in later stages.

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