# Interaction between Parents and Children during Food Shopping

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Abstract: The main objective of the study is to observe the parent-child interaction during food shopping. Children play a significant influence in family purchase decisions and are particularly active while shopping for foods and beverages. They either expressly demand for a particular product or simply place it in the basket. Negotiation takes place in the case of certain food products, with children using various influencing techniques and styles to convince their parents. This happens particularly in the case of processed and sugary items which are regarded as unhealthy. The parents in turn have different approaches to influence their children which varies according to their parenting style. The influencing techniques and styles used by the children varies by age, which shall be dwelled upon. In addition to parent-child interaction, the study briefly covers sibling and grandparent influence. It also looks at how parents socialize their children on the basics of shopping.

Keywords - children, parenting, decision-making, food shopping, buyer behavior.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional construction of childhood which viewed children as future adults with no agency of their own has coming under scrutiny with the changing times. Today, children as being looked at as individual beings with their own desires and expectations. Corporates and marketers in particular champion this outlook, launching a myriad of products and services specifically catering to the child consumers. The nag factor is leveraged on, which induces children to pester their parents into buy products and brands of their choice. Children thus play a significant role in purchase decisions. They accompany their parents for shopping and remain actively engaged throughout the customer buying cycle. This is particularly true for food, beverages and sweets, the most commonly purchased category by children. As they grow up, children master various techniques, styles, and appeals to influence their parents. The parents are constantly required to negotiate with the child before a decision is taken. This research attempts to study the dynamics between the parents and children while shopping for food and beverages.

# II. AN OVERVIEW OF INDIAN CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS

The economic liberalization in 1991 led to the entry of private and foreign players into the Indian market. The country became increasingly McDonaldized as superstores and shopping malls materialized. Its economy crossed INR 19,190.11 billion as on Q4 of 2017. The rising spending power in both metros and emerging cities has enkindled consumption desires. Children's potential as consumers and active contributors to the nation's economy cannot be overlooked. Children in metros and bigger cities possess sizeable funds on account of the pocket money and gift money they receive from elders. In 2016, the segment spent close to INR 22,594 crore majorly on clothes, shoes, junk food etc.

## III. MAJOR FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHILD'S PURCHASE BEHAVIOR

The major factors influencing the child's purchase behavior, especially towards food products, include the changing lifestyle, demographic characteristics, advertisements, and product characteristics. Changing Lifestyles There are sociological explanations for the evolution of children as consumers. The reduction in number of children per parent and the rise in nuclear family structure have led to more attention given to the child. Double-income households expect children to shoulder more responsibilities and therefore give them more independence in taking purchase decisions.

Food habits in India are rapidly changing with the popularity of ready-to-consume fast food, packaged and non-traditional food particularly among urban children. Such habits are often seen as a cause for concern by parents due to health reasons.

Demographic Characteristics Factors such as age, gender, and income affect purchase and consumption behavior of children towards food products. Younger children between ages 4 and 8 are more involved in the purchase of food products. The same applies to children from higher income groups. Speaking of gender, boys tend to be more influenced by the marketing tactics used in selling food items. Girls meanwhile help parents in buying breakfast cereals or fruits.

Advertisements Children are also bombarded with tele- vision advertisements largely around food and beverages. For instance, food and beverage category comprised 45% and 19% of the ad share on kids and non-kids channels respectively in India. With Indian children spending 87% of their viewing time on non-kids channels due to co-viewing, such ads push them to influence their parents easily. Children are especially influenced by advertisements of children's food category brands. Such is the impact of ads that children sing the jingles while shopping for the products.

Product Characteristics Food items available in different flavors and with colorful packaging in different shapes and sizes draw the child's attention more effectively than simple ones. Often, enlarged images of cartoons or celebrities or a promise to give the kid special powers are used to draw their interest. Any mention of discounts, freebies act as appeal factors too.

#### IV. CHILDREN AS INFLUENCERS

Children act as influencers both in shortlisting the stores to visit and selecting the products to purchase. They also introduce parents to new products or services thereby changes the family's consumption patterns. Children find it easier to influence parents within the stores than at home. The reason for this is parents would prefer to give in to their children's demands made while shopping rather than risking a public confrontation. Their influence is greater in the case of low involvement and inexpensive products or products in which they are direct consumers.

Children influence their parents both directly and indirectly. Direct influence takes place when the child explicitly demands for a product while indirect is when the child's preferences are given consideration while making purchases. Children use different strategies to influence their parents, like experience, legitimate, coalition, emotional, and bargaining.

Children learn persuasion techniques, styles and appeals upon entering grade school which are fully developed by the age of 10. Techniques are classified as Direct ('I want'/ 'Buy me') and Emotional ('I must have'/ 'I'll die if I don't get'). Persuasion styles are classified as pleading, persistent, forceful, demonstrative, sugar-coated, threatening, and pity. Younger children are more likely to cause conflicts, which decreases with age (see Figure 1).

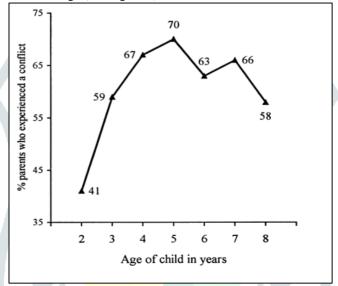


Figure 1 Percentage of parents experiencing a purchase-related conflict with their child in a store (Source: Valkenburg and Cantor, 2002)

The child also uses various appeals to win over their parent. Children stress on the time-saving, educational, nutritional or economical nature of their purchase. Children also form coalitions with their siblings to exert greater influence. It usually begins with a discussion between two or more siblings about a common interest or need. This discussion sometimes occurs in private i.e. away from the parents. The ideas are then put to the parents after the siblings decide what to suggest. The success of a coalition depended on the ability to justify and sell a purchase request. This highlights the significance of knowledge and information as the influencing strategy.

## V. PARENTS' RESPONSE TO CHILDREN'S INFLUENCE

Parents may respond to their children in four ways, each with their consequences, 1) They may fulfill the child's request, which is usually the scenario, 2) They may purchase a substitute product in place of the product demanded, 3) They may postpone the request, or 4) They may completely decline the request. The degree to which parents entertain their children's influence also depends on the parenting style. Children with authoritarian parents have the least amount of say while permissive have the highest. Neglecting parents have little concern for the child's development, while authoritative parents allow their children to take independent decisions albeit within certain boundaries.

## VI. PARENTS ROLE IN SOCIALIZATION

Parents socialize their children to the basics of shopping. They teach them how to browse and shortlist among various alternatives. Often, parents might stress on the health benefits of the products to influence their children. They also teach them how to clear the bills during checkout. Learning also happens through non-verbal communication. For instance, the children observing their parents squeeze the packet of bread to check its freshness and imitate. Such interactions become the foundation when the children become independent shoppers.

#### VII. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

- 1) To observe the interaction between parents and children during the purchase of food and beverage category.
- 2) To examine the techniques and styles used by the children to influence their family's purchase of food and beverage products.
- To find out parents' response to children's influence while shopping for food and beverages.

#### VIII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We undertook non-participatory observation in six supermarkets of Ahmedabad, including both locations frequented by discount-seekers (D Mart) as well as premium buyers (Star Bazaar). We also went to locations with high customer footfall, such as Big Bazaar and Reliance Mart. An average of 2 hours was spent in each store, usually between late afternoon and early evening. Over 50 kids and parents were observed in total. Observation was found to be a suitable method as it allowed us to keep a track of how interaction and influence took place between parents and children in a natural setting.

We then conducted in-depth interviews with 15 parents. See Table 1 shows respondent details.

| 4                            |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Table 1 Respondents Details  |  |
| 5                            |  |
| 10                           |  |
|                              |  |
| 9                            |  |
| 6                            |  |
| Number of Children in Family |  |
| 11                           |  |
| 4                            |  |
|                              |  |

On finding that families were reluctant to share information about their children with strangers, we chose our respondents through convenience and snowball sampling. Respondents' profession (or profession of head of household), their area of residence and the schools in which the respondents' children studied were taken as indicators of the family's economic status. Interviews generally lasted between 12-15 minutes on an average and were conducted face-to-face either at respondents' homes or workplace or via telephone, depending on their convenience. Respondent insights have been quoted in the Findings and Discussion section. The respondents' names have been changed to uphold confidentiality.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Children play a crucial role in food shopping, from influencing the purchases to be made for home and deciding where to purchase from. Respondent Rakhi states her 9-year-old daughter's presence "has changed the family food habits at home. We make our dishes less spicy so we do not buy as much chilies, masalas etc. as we used to". Despite preferring to shop at the nearest superstores, parents like Chaitanya and Marie have to specially drive down to relatively distant locations that have gaming zones and special activities which children prefer. Children's engagement while shopping at a supermarket was very high. They were inquisitive and excited, dragging their parents to the aisle of their choice, asking them question on why certain products were being purchased, or making suggestions. They would casually place items into the trolley sometimes without consulting the adult companion. Moreover, children were also seen arranging the products within the trolley. The younger lot would sit within the trolley itself and be taken around the superstore, thus making for an engaging and fun-filled shopping experience. Children actively participated in the shopping of all food product categories. However, their main interest lied in packaged foods such as chocolates, chips, biscuits, etc. and carbonated drinks. The higher involvement towards this sub-category is due to the fact that they are the direct consumers of such products. Children were drawn towards items available in snack-size or combo packs with different flavors and bright and colorful packaging (for e.g. Kellogg's cornflakes). The products were usually available at discounted prices or bundled with free gifts. Kinder Joy candy, with its free toy hidden inside its packaging, has become a rage among kids. This was observed both in our non-participatory observations at supermarkets and interviews. Packaging with cartoon figures of popular television characters also impacted the child's decision-making. Respondent Marie's 7-year-old son often requests for products with images of Indian children's cartoons Chhota Bheem or Motu Patlu on them. She brings him to his senses by asking him, "Are you simply buying the product for the cartoon or actually going to consume it?". He places it back in the shelf without protesting. Both the children and parents influenced each other during food shopping. The child knew who the decision maker in the family unit was and who could be influenced. We observed a 6-year-old kid, accompanied by just her grandfather initially, who was fixated on a shelfful of wafer biscuits for over five minutes but not taking any action. It turns out she was waiting for her mother, the final decider, to join them so she could go on her shopping spree.

Younger children resorted to more expressive form of tantrums. Respondent Shailesh describes his 4-year-old daughter as stubborn, who resorts to screaming on hearing a "No". Mukund jokes that his 9-year-old daughter thinks the "supermarket is hers and both parents are at her mercy". Children above 10 were generally more discerning in their demands took a rational approach to convince parents. "My kids have grown past the age of pestering. They do not mind postponing their demands. They only keep

giving reminders once in a while", says Vivek, who has two sons aged 11 and 16 respectively. While toning down the tantrums, older children do try to assert agency as independent shoppers, especially when they have gathered enough pocket money. When Sheela confronts her 14-year-old daughter for buying a food item she objects to, the latter retorts, "I bought it with my own money!".

The parents either accept or turn down the demands made by the children after some level of negotiation. There were cases where parents (or grandparents) would explicitly encourage children to participate in the purchase process, thus giving them a sense of independence. A seven-year-old child shopping with his grandmother, for instance, was constantly praised for his selection of mangoes. Encouraged by her remarks, he began recommending vegetables as well until she reminded him, "You don't even eat that stuff".

Other parents would negotiate with the children by suggesting a substitute product. We observed a child who was demanding mayonnaise but was offered a packet of imli pichkoo (tamarind sauce) instead. Then there was the parent who asked his child wanting biscuits to wait until evening for pizza. In both incidents, the parent may have a better sense of the child's eating habits and restrict them from making impulse purchases. Children also learn the importance of delayed gratification through this.

At multiple times, parents refused to entertain their children's whims. One mom, fed up with her child's constant nagging for a packet of chips, flung the packet back into the shelf. Parents are aware of their children's pestering strategies and often call them out for it. One parent fumingly asked her kid to "Stop with the drama!" when her child was on his knees literally begging for Kitkat. Respondent Joseph, whose children are aged 13 and 16, stated that while did not usually interfere with his children's purchase decisions, he was up in arms against "addictive items like Cadbury or Pepsi which the kids finish off within no time".

Parents often deny their children packaged food citing health reasons. An 8-year-old female child who showed her grandmother ready-to-cook pasta was immediately dismissed with, "Don't eat such things!". 9 of the 15 (60%) parents interviewed touched upon the issue of health, and each addressed it differently. 4 of the parents with younger children used fear tactic to dissuade them from junk food, warning them "they will be given injections if they fall sick". Respondent Manisha mentions how her family remained extra cautious when her 5-year old daughter Palak with a sweet tooth for Kinderjoy fell very ill. Palak was living in a joint family where she would demand for Kinderjoy whenever an adult member went out. Being permissive in general, her requests were rarely denied. Soon, she began having health problems after which she was only allowed two units of Kinderjoy each month. On protesting, the adult members would remind her of the consequence of overindulging. This tactic worked Palak for a few weeks following her recovery. Soon, she began asking for substitute products for Kinderjoy, persisting, "If not Kinderjoy, get Dairy Milk", and if the adult was adamant, she shot back, "At least get a toffee – its only worth INR 1!". This illustrates the level of astuteness in even the youngest of children, with parents needing to keep up with their negotiation-skills.

One could learn from Vidya, a working parent with an authoritative approach towards her 13-year-old son Sumit. Vidya recounts how she keeps a constant check on Sumit's food habits despite her hectic schedule, ensuring he gets healthy home-cooked meals and avoids junk food. She has also cultivated a habit in him of informing her about his food and beverage purchases even when he shops independently. When he requests for fried wafers, she reasons with him by pointing out its fatty content, suggesting him healthier and tasty alternatives. Despite being described as "headstrong", Sumit is convinced with his mother's rationale. Vidya mentions how being "friendly in general yet strict to an extent" with her child has led to better negotiations and limited tantrums.

Normally, one parent is relatively strict with the child while the other is lenient. Parents who make the grocery purchase and/or have knowledge of their child's eating habits are the ones to place restrictions or negotiate with the child. Rakhi shares that her husband gives in easily to their daughter's needs because he's mostly at work and doesn't know what she's consuming during the day. "It is I who keeps a track of what my daughter eats during the day. So when she cries, 'It's been so long since I had this ice cream!', I remind her, 'You just had that two days before..."".

Parents teach children the fundaments of shopping besides playing the role of gatekeepers. Children are taught general shopping etiquettes, with some mothers were minding their children to be careful while maneuvering the trolley to avoid hurting anyone. Overcurious kids who fished around other customers' trolleys were immediately chided. Parents also explained about specific products and pricing aspects, like asking them to check the expiry date or clarifying the concept of Buy 1 Get 1 Free. 4.

Older children, usually female, often discussed with their parents about cooking ingredients. One mother we observed was telling her daughter aged twelve which brand of chili powder to select.

In addition to parent-child interaction, we noticed siblings frequently engage with one another while shopping. Coalition was one such tactic, with two sisters aged 12+ convincing their little brother to request their dad for Choki Choki chocolate sticks. Many a time, the older sibling tries to act as a substitute parent by sharing their opinions on whether to purchase the food products chosen by the younger siblings, leading to negotiations and conflicts. For instance, when an elder sister suggested her younger one to purchase Bourvita, the latter shook her head and said, "I'm already grown up" (Bournvita is aimed as a health drink for youngsters). After much back and forth between the two, the younger one declared, "Only if you buy me a combo pack of Kellogg's will I take Bournvita". Then there was the case of an elder sibling with a can of Fanta in her hand who drove her sister to tears by refusing to get a can for her. Finally, their mother intervened and both went home happy.

In extended families, children often find it easier to approach grandparents to fulfil their wants. Interviewee Prakash says his 9-year-old daughter overindulges when her grandfather takes her out on separate shopping trips. Rakhi believes grandparents are there to pamper children, adding how "both her mother-in-law and daughter are fans of pav bhaji (a fast food dish consisting of a thick vegetable curry served with a soft bread roll) and join hands to demand it for dinner". Parents especially in upper-middle class households or in dual income households are increasingly preferring to shop for groceries online. Rakhi mentions how

"ordering from the grocery app Big Basket has reduced the family visits to shopping stores and obviated any opportunity for the child to turn cranky and nag". The increasing penetration of internet and popularity of food and grocery apps will evolve the nature of interaction between parents and children in food shopping in the coming years.

### IX. CONCLUSIONS

Our findings are consistent with previous research undertaken on interactions between parent and child during food shopping. Children have gained tremendous agency in the household purchase decision with the multiplicity of choices available at their disposal. To the younger lot especially, the supermarket is nothing short of a mini Disney World, albeit one they can easily access on a weekly basis. They are full of beans when their parents drive them down to the store and are eager to explore the place inside out. Of course, their main attraction is the scintillating array of candies, chocolates, biscuits, cheese, ice-cream, and cold beverages that adorn the shelves and tempt with their vibrant packaging, the variety of flavors, free gifts, discounted pricing and images of their favorite cartoon characters. All this frenzy is thanks to the power of advertisements and brand integrations. Children become the perfect targets to set the cash register ringing, and is the parents who are paying for their purchases.

Children are maturing faster than ever and they carry sophisticated negotiation skills up their sleeve by the time they are in elementary school. They will pull no punches – they will scream and bawl and beg and reason and nag until their parents to their hedonic demands. Children under 10 especially are prone to the display the more extreme and emotional persuasion styles i.e. plead, persist, forceful, and demonstrative among others. Siblings are double-trouble – they gang up to make things go their way. Older children find more rational ways of persuasion, using their knowledge of the products and different appeals (for instance, highlighting the discount available). All children know exactly which parent will be convinced easily and which one is a hard nut to crack, and they decide their negotiation strategies accordingly.

One has heard of the adage 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. In this context, children can run riot in their impulsiveness if their parents do not exercise certain control. This can be challenging, as one misstep can trigger a flood of tears and be the cause of social embarrassment. Authoritarian parenting style will ultimately lead to rebellion, while overly permissive parents might regret encouraging overindulgence in their children. Authoritative parenting that is a balance of friendliness and discipline can yield better results in the long run, as was seen in the case of Vidya and her son Sumit. Having a dialogue with the child and explaining the parent's point of view may warrant more effort compared to a 'No' point-blank. But it certainly works wonders.

There are increasing conversations around health with the ubiquity of processed and sugary food which parents regard as unhealthy. Exaggerating the effects of packaged foods will not work in this day and age when children can simply Google to check facts. Proactive parents not only keeping a watch on their children's dietary habits; they stay up-to-date in their knowledge of foods, read up about their nutritional value, talk to their children on the subject patiently, and suggest or prepare healthier alternatives for them that does not deprive them of variety and keeps them happy.

If the nag factor in children can inspire better parenting skills, then nothing like it.

## X. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

Funding constraints compelled us to limit our sample size and restrict to a qualitative approach. The research can further benefit with a mixed method approach that integrates ethnographic study and survey methodology with a larger sample. The variable of parenting style and its impact on shopping interactions can be further explored.

Secondly, this research has taken into account the views of parents in case of the in depth interviews. However, researchers have emphasized the need for active participation of children as research participants. They have specified interesting methods such as drawing research and experimental research which can help gain better insights from children. Finally, consumer buying behavior, particularly in upper-middle/upper class and double income households, is evolving with the advent digital media and the rise in shopping apps such as Grofers and Big Basket. Its impact on the shopping interactions between parents and children is a prospective avenue for research.

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