ABSTRACT

The Context

Relatively little effort has gone into studying the retail purchase decision processes in Indian families. Given that India is one of the world's largest consumer markets and is an emerging world economic champion too, this market presents a potentially vast untapped source for research and business. Who within the Indian family has influence at the various stages of the family purchase decision making process? Does this influence vary by stage of the decision process or by type of purchase decision? Who within the family makes the final purchase decision? Such questions are fundamental to a more thorough and complete understanding of family purchase decision making within the Indian family. This research attempts to examine questions such as these.

Studies have found that the roles of husband, wife and children are fluid and continuously change with time. They are likely to shift, depending on the specific product or service, the family role structure orientation, and the specific stage in the decision making process. These factors also are mediated by changing lifestyles, particularly the changes in family lifestyle options associated with women working outside of the home. With these changes there is also a continuous change of their involvement in purchasing decisions. So the behaviour of husband, wife and children as consumers has to be studied regularly to find out the main decision makers within the family.
The extant research in the context of family decision making has been mainly oriented towards studying the purchase involvement of husband-wife dyads. Other members of the family — particularly children have largely been neglected. Though, husband and wife may play a dominant role in the decision making process vis-à-vis products and services yet the kidfluence aspect has recently gained importance because of gradual metamorphosis of their role in the family. Therefore, to have a meaningful understanding of the family decision making pattern in the purchase of different products, the children’s role needs to be taken into consideration. Present study is an effort in this direction. It is hoped that the findings will provide a realistic insight into the dynamics at play in the family decision making process in the Indian context.

The Objective

This study attempts to empirically investigate [a] the relative involvement of husband-wife & children in the purchase of specific products (i.e. product specific influences) [b] the effect of family type i.e. single earning and dual earning families (independent variable) on the relative involvement of husband-wife and children during stages in the decision process (i.e. idea initiation, information collection and final decision) and the various product related sub-decisions (amount to be spent, when to purchase, what brand, type, size and colour to purchase and from which dealer) for five consumer durables — refrigerator, two-wheeler, music system, four-wheeler and electric mixer. [c] to measure the relative role of husband-wife and children during the decisions making process with respect to three stages i.e. idea initiation, information search and final decision (i.e. stage specific influences). [d] to measure the relative role of husband-wife and children during the sub-decisions regarding purchase viz. amount to be spent, when to purchase, brand to purchase, what size, colour and type to purchase.
The Methodology

The study is primarily based on the premise that the type of family — independent variable — and stages and sub-decisions in the purchase of specific products — dependent variable — are independent of each other as far as the relative involvement of different family members is concerned. For the purpose of achieving the objectives of the study, hypotheses were framed on the basis of specific product categories, the stages of the decision process, and the sub-decisions involved in the purchase of each product.

The rationale behind the selection of the aforementioned products for the present study was that these products represent buying situations ranging from complex buying decisions (e.g. automobile) to relatively less complex ones (e.g. stereo) and also the number and type of role played by the various family members is expected to vary in each case. Further, since the products were of use to all members of the family their participation in decision making for the same was assumed.

The research instrument consisted of structured questionnaire and the respondents were required to indicate their level of involvement with the help of three-point rating scale viz. HI (highly involved), MI (moderately involved) and NI (not involved).

Using the structured questionnaire, data was collected from purposive convenience sample of middle and upper middle class nuclear families consisting of husband, wife and two unmarried dependent children (between 14 and 19 years in age) — over a three-year period (1997-2000). These families were residing in the three major cities — Aligarh, Bareilly and Meerut — of Western Uttar Pradesh, India. Only those households that had purchased the items under study within the last two years preceding the administration of the questionnaire were considered for the present study. This was necessary to minimize forgetting effect and also social bias. The middle and upper middle class families were chosen as they are largely
created by the development process and they usually represent a force of modernism in the developing societies. Assuming that joint families would have very complex purchase decision-processes, they were left out of the scope of the present study.

While administering the questionnaire the parents were instructed not to confer or consult one another and the researcher was present so as to respond to doubts and queries regarding the questions in the research instrument. The researcher made it a point to personally fill up the questionnaire in case of the children after explaining to them the contents of the questionnaire and eliciting their views.

Of the 480 families that were initially approached through their wards, finally only 184 (38%) families qualified for the study. This resulted in a total of 552 separate completed questionnaires. Of these 72 were residents of Aligarh, 58 from Bareilly and 54 belonged to Meerut. It should be very clear at the outset that the 184 families (i.e. 38% of 480) who finally qualified for the study are not a representative sample of their respective population segments.

For the purpose of analysis of responses 27 possible combinations of responses (i.e. HHH, HHM etc) were collapsed into six categories.

1. Joint Decision Family (Husband=Wife=Children)
2. Husband Dominant Family
3. Wife Dominant Family
4. Husband & Wife Dominant Family (Husband=Wife>Children)
5. Parent-Children Dominant Family (Husband/Wife & Children>Spouse)
6. Children Dominant Family (Children > Parents)

It should be kept in mind that these categories have been used for the first time by any researcher in this area. These categories were necessary as the present study takes into account the relative influence of husband, wife and two children in the family.
For the purpose of ascertaining whether there were significant differences in the responses in case of single earning and dual earning families for the various decision stages and the related sub-decisions for each product, the $\chi^2$ statistic was applied on the involvement level among the two types of families to find variations in the decision stages and the sub-decisions for each of the product. The hypotheses were tested on the basis of significance of results. In quite a number of cases, the null hypothesis was rejected.

**Conclusions**

A perceptible shift in the direction of increased wife involvement both unilateral and on an equal footing with the husband; involvement of the children — both unilateral and in coalition with either parent, both in case of stages of decision process as also the sub-decisions was observed. Children were found to be particular active during information collection stage and in the evaluation of alternatives vis-à-vis brand. Even in case of male-oriented products like four-wheeler and two-wheeler, in quite a few instances, all the family members were found to be involved in both types of families indicating overshadowing of husband’s dominance. The issue of price and vendor selection was found to be still in the domain of husband.

It is interesting to note that even in case of a big-ticket item like automobile, instances of equal involvement of husband and wife are on the rise and this suggests that the working wife has made inroads into hitherto male bastion.

Role specialization was found to exist in family purchase decision making in the Indian context also but with a minor modification. The findings are heavily skewed in favour of husband playing a dominant role in deciding on financial allocation of the family resources as also the selection of the vendor across nearly all product categories.
Contrary to the observations of earlier researchers in the context of traditional societies considerable involvement of all the family members in the purchase decisions was observed. The earlier notion of blanket unilateral husband dominance in case of less developed nations was not found to be evident as considerable occurrences of joint family involvement across all the product categories was observed.

The findings of the study further indicate prevalence of greater husband-wife egalitarianism in dual earning families. The influence and interest exhibited by the husband in case of items like refrigerator and electric mixer and the involvement of the wife (and also children) in the purchase decision process concerning items like two-wheeler and automobile, traditionally considered to be the domain of husband, are indicative of the setting in of modern sex role norms in the context of Indian middle class.

The present study in addition to having academic worth has practical implications. The results of this study may prove to be useful in designing marketing strategies and in this context a number of suggestions have been made to the marketers in the area of developing promotion campaigns, selecting markets, market segmentation and product design and development.

As the geographical extent of this study was limited to Western Uttar Pradesh, India, and was urban centric too, similar studies in other regions of the country would add both breadth and depth to our understanding of the family as a decision making unit.

Most of the studies in the area of family decision making, including the present one, are urban centric, where the household members earn the income from wage employment. Further, in agricultural households, especially those in developing countries like India, incomes fluctuate widely from year to year. A study in this direction, investigating the dynamics of household consumption decision is therefore called for and can yield interesting results for the present day marketer.
Given the heterogeneous ethnicity found within India, as well as different levels of economic development and varying family structures, additional replicative and extension efforts will be necessary to “paint” a more complete picture of family decision making.

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