CHAPTER TWO

GROWTH OF PESTER POWER

The earlier chapter deals with various issues related to marketing to children and the strategies used to target them. The current chapter deals with the views on historical developments related to pester power and the genesis of pester power in India and other foreign countries. The chapter further explores various factors that lead to the growth of pester power and the legal and ethical concerns related to the same.

2.1 History

In the views of Cook (1995) and Seiter (1993), children were officially targeted directly for the first time during the post-depression conditions of 1930s when merchants, manufacturers and advertisers realized the importance of this strong market segment so far driven by the mothers only. Prior to this, children were allowed limited decision making, mostly restricted to impulse categories like candies and toys. Though it can be assumed that all children are more or less the same, there is sufficient evidence to proclaim that there might be some fundamental differences owing to national, cultural, socio-economic and legal environments that differ from country to country. Major differences in the consumer socialization process, marketing environments, broadcast systems, family structures, societal values make the international studies on children more interesting. Another reason for increasing attention on this area is that marketing to children raises issues that do not emerge in marketing to adults with reasonable pragmatism (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).
2.2 Pester Power in India

According to estimates, in 2005, there were more than 120 million tween (children aged between 8-12 years of age) in India (Soni & Upadhyaya, 2007). Among them, around 45 million live in urban areas who have the power of determining or influencing the whopping Rs. 20,000 crore worth purchasing decisions on food, mobile phones, apparel, cars and FMCGs. The arrival of niche channels like the Cartoon Network, Hungama, Jetix, Disney etc has given a big push to the children’s overall knowledge about the products available for them in the market. Quite often, they are successful in making parents almost redundant in family decision making by enforcing their influence strongly. The total spending of the Indian youth is about $6.5 billion - their own discretionary income plus what their families spend on them. Indian teens alone buy nearly 60% of the fizzy drinks, chocolates and jeans sold in India (Quart, 2004).

2.3 Factors Affecting the Growth of Pester Power

Most products are not directly available to the young child and must be obtained through an intermediary purchasing agent, the parent. The extent of the influence a child may have on the parent’s purchase decision seems dependent on both child’s assertiveness and parent’s child-centredness. Berey and Pollay (1968) find that the child initiates the flow of influence through the possible degree of assertiveness and the receiving end i.e. the parent’s yielding is based on how well the parent is “tuned in” or attached to the child.

Cook (2000) in his detailed research on children as consumers has quoted Grumbine, who concluded as early as in 1938, that an important factor in the growth of the juvenile market was the trend towards stimulating greater self-expression in children themselves. An observation by Grumbine shows that progressive parents not only allow
children to make their own independent decisions but urge them to choose their own clothes and work out plans for their own rooms thereby creating “older youngones”. He also suggested that the paradigm shift in this regards encompasses something beyond merely the capitalist drive to expand markets and to extend “consumer citizenship” to all. This transformation can be seen as the change in the cultural construction of the “child” thereby leading to partial and progressive process of extending to children the status of full personhood i.e. the recognition as legitimate, individualized consumers.

Various factors have led to this mammoth power that the children possess in the form of ‘pester power’ – the subject matter of the current study. On closer inspection it can be concluded that pester power is not the outcome of a single factor held in isolation, but an amalgam of dimensions encompassing the commercial, cultural, social, and psychological configurations of children. Studies in India are inadequate in developing rich knowledge base for analyzing the factors contributing to the genesis or growth of pester power. Though several studies on media habits of children, parents’ yielding and response strategies; and marketing strategies for children do quote about some discrete factors in isolation, only one study tries to accumulate them as done by Soni and Upadhyaya (2007). Though the list can’t be made exhaustive considering the multitude of factors affecting the growth of Pester Power, an attempt is made to highlight a few leading and worth noting causes for this largely observed phenomenon based on various articles, news reports and interviews with experts and parents.

A cursory glance at the factors responsible for the growing pester power (see table 2.1) shows that various socio-cultural, psychological and commercial environments mould the kids from time to time.
Table 2.1: Factors leading to the growth of Pester Power

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2.3.1 Socio-Cultural factors

a.) Changing family structure

Soni and Upadhyaya (2007) have reasserted the fact that Indian society has undergone a rampant change in terms of the structure and environment of its vital institution – the family. Families, as described by McNeal (1999), are becoming more child-led. This is largely the case with single-parent families where the child is given more responsibilities of making independent purchases and grocery shopping. Also changing social trends with working mothers, delayed childbearing, increased divorce rates and reduced family sizes have further contributed to increase in overall importance that kids enjoy in the family.
b.) Double-income families and Lack of Parents’ quality time

Often when both the parents are working, they feel guilty about not spending sufficient time with kids. Most parents try to yield in to demands of kids thereby trying to put their guilt feeling at bay. Due to the dual income sources, these parents have relatively more disposable income. They try to substitute quality time with attractive items displayed in the market and thereby succumb to the demand list of the children. This further leads to increased consumerism amongst kids. In their study, Soni and Upadhyaya (2007) have reaffirmed the fact that pester power is inversely proportionate to the time available from the parents.

c.) Increasing sources of pocket money

Grandparents often have an increasing role in bringing up children when both the parents are working. It is reported that grandparents are the fastest growing income sources for the children. Phenomenon like the ‘Six Pockets Syndrome’ has already affected the behavioural aspects of children in China (Lareaudie, 2006) after the implementation of ‘One child’ policy by the government. This metaphor was used to describe the privilege enjoyed by the single child in the Chinese family who received gifts/pocket money not only from parents but also from grandparents and other relatives. With family sizes compressing, this trend is also being witnessed in the Indian families. Also, frequent festivals and occasions in India create children as the receiving end of gifts and “Bakshish” (a popular trend of receiving money from the elders). Thus the child’s pocket is often loaded with money from several family members like the grand parents, relatives, neighbours etc. This makes the child independent in making purchases for various products like chocolates, confectioneries, games, toys, books thereby raising the indulgence level.

d.) Rising single parent household

Research supports that children in single parent households make their first purchases almost a year earlier than their two-parent household counterparts. Since women in the
family households do the majority of grocery shopping, the mother in the single female-headed households co-ordinates this task by taking her children with her to the retail outlets or depends upon her older children to do the independent purchasing by themselves for her. The same fact is substantiated by the findings of mail-out survey study by Ahuja, Capella, and Taylor (1998). They attempted to find the differences that exist between single-parent and dual-parent family types and concluded that children of single parents shop alone for the family at three times the rate of children raised in dual parent households.

e.) Delayed parenthood
Unlike yesteryears where adults were married in their early adolescence or adulthood, at present adults have many priorities before they take the decision to marry. The result is that a vast majority of population chooses to marry at a relatively older age which further results in delayed parenthood, better financial conditions at the time of birth of children and better careers with more disposable incomes. Also, married couples choose to remain in the DINKS (Double Income No Kids) category for a few years to build their financial security and settle down in their careers. A 2000 study of 50 older couples by SNDT University showed that most of them had kids after they turned 35 as reported by Soni and Upadhyaya (2007).

f.) The Indulgent parents
Most parents seek to give a better standard of living to their children as compared to what they had for themselves, thereby unknowingly exposing children to new realms of indulgence. Gradually the authoritarian divide between the parents and children is fading and paving ways for more open and informal relationships, wherein the child discusses about his desired products, pleads, convinces, persuades and even coaxes parents to give into her demands. Communication barriers are being broken up as the stereotypical patriarch and matriarch families are making way for child-dominated
families wherein the child successfully knows how to use endearment for material pleasures.

g.) **Hyper-Parenting**

Sometimes, hyper parenting results in parents overscheduling their children’s life with a heavy dose of academics and extra-curricular activities (sports, hobbies etc.), forcing the little adults to excel in different fields for all-round development. This state is described as ‘hurried child syndrome’ leading to tendencies to convert children into miniature adults performing several different activities (www.wordspy.com). This exposes children to a wide range of products like stationery, computer games, CDs, hobby items and sports related items, games, toys etc. Often parents try to lure children into excelling in various activities by trading with the aforesaid items, thereby widening their interest levels in the same and increasing their materialistic desires.

### 2.3.2 Psychological factors

a.) **Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure is described as the pressure exerted by a peer group in encouraging a person to change his/her attitude, behavior and/or morals, to conform to, for example, the group's actions, fashion sense, taste in music and television, or outlook on life (http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Peer_pressure). Peers are the most influential agents for learning consumption habits amongst children right from early childhood through adolescence (Moschis and Churchill, 1978).

While the parents provide reasoning and rationale behind the purchase decision, peers’ influence is more impulsive and instinctive. Children place a great deal of importance on the social aspects of consumption which they use as the basis of interactive communication with their peers (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). This also is related to conformity norms for social acceptance in their groups which affects their group status.
Children quite often pester for products that their peers also possess so as to be a part of the in-group of their peers.

**b.) Growing materialism and Consumerism**

Many researchers refer to the ‘Passe Syndrome’ amongst kids that makes them increasingly dismiss products that fail to cater to their immediate needs due to the plethora of choices at their disposal. They seem to be always in the “what’s next” mode quickly demanding the next, upgraded things once the initial desires have been fulfilled (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2004). Behavioural attitudes like Brand switching, impulsive decisions and constant aspirations for self-extensions of personality through materialistic symbols prompt many marketers to constantly encash children’s fickle mindedness. Exposure to various products at an early age leads to increasing consumerism in this generation. They seek ‘instant gratification’ and influence parents to give into their demands.

**c.) Greater need for Self-expression**

Just like adults, children too use materialistic possessions and brands to create and communicate their self-concepts. Chaplin and John (2005) through their three studies provide evidence that self-brand connections develop between middle childhood and early adolescence. They also report that self brand connections increase with age, accompanied by increases in the depth of connections being made. Older children often use objects (or brands) as a way of symbolic interactionsim to symbolise group membership or extend their self-images. Marketers exploit this desire of children by offering a plethora of items ranging from racing cars, gaming zones, beyblades, machine games for the boys and doll houses, doll sets, beauty accessories, kitchen sets etc for the girls.
2.3.3 Market Forces

a.) Stealth marketing strategies

Children born in the last two decades are exposed to today’s highly consumerist and branded world and hence are more receptive to advertising and marketing than ever. Children today think more in an interactive dimension and so the emergence of the internet and subsequent rise in e-marketing provides them immediate and interactive response and real time interactions. In recent years, advertisers have begun to experiment with this non-conventional technique, in which the consumers do not understand that they are being targeted. Advertisements in print media and infomercials in television are popular examples of this strategy. The marketers’ main intent here is to blur the line between advertisement and content. Databases of child customers are being built from information gathered from various advergames, online sites and direct surveys to further tap them for attractive offers and schemes. Cartoon characters from the favourite kids’ channels are used almost on all kinds of products, including Tiffin boxes, water bottles, garments, school bags, stationery items and even personal care items. Be it international characters like Barbie, Spiderman, Noddy or Harry Porter or their Indian counterparts like Krrish, Shaktiman, Mogli, Bal Ganesha, Hanuman – marketers use them profitably for product placements in films and children related programmes. These get easily strike a chord in the kids’ hearts which lead them to pester their parents for buying them.

b.) Integrated Marketing Communication

Integrated Marketing Communication is a management concept that is designed to make all aspects of marketing communication such as advertising, sales promotion, public relations, and direct marketing work together as a unified force, rather than permitting each to work in isolation. (http://www.marketing.about.com). Children increasingly are being exposed to integrated marketing communications activities that include television and print advertising, product placements, sales promotions, packaging designs, in-school marketing and advergames (Moore, 2004). Marketers are
constantly adding new avenues of reaching children thereby bombarding their tender minds with superfluity of stimuli which the latter find difficult to resist and sometimes process also. Advertisers are entering the schools with various posters, billboards, promotional campaigns etc, under educational or commercial programs. Contents and prize winning competitions for slogan completion and print ads further expose this gullible segment to the vicious intentions of the marketers. One such example is McDonalds that not only uses conventional media like television advertising, print ads but also offers promotional schemes like Happy Meals and also discounts on report cards of students in an American School (http://www.richmondbargains.com/2010). The mascot Ronald is famous even amongst toddlers and that is how it creates long lasting images.

**c.) Retail Communication**

Point-of-purchase material and packaging are the main forms of retail communication that appeal to children. Packages that are designed for children generate brand communication, communicate the product type and create temptation and desire to purchase the product (Smita G., 1987). In addition, most parents also carry kids to the retail outlets and malls while shopping which leads to early exposure to retail communications. Mohankumar, P.K.Sinha, and Krishna (2003) look at the child-retail communication interaction at the Kirana Store, the Indian version of the US ‘mom and pop’ retail outlet in New Delhi. The methodologies for data collection are the non-participatory unstructured observation and exit interview techniques whose findings suggest that retail outlet can be used as a communication medium for reaching children rather than just using it as a mere storehouse of goods.

**d.) Early exposure to Shopping habits**

Studies on child consumption patterns show that children start accompanying parents to the marketplace as early as one month old and begin to make independent purchases as early as four years old. On such shopping trips, they learn to make product choices
with or without assistance. With growing technological aids like the internet or the online shopping sites, they also gather useful information for big ticket items like the computer, television or the holiday packages and help their parents make purchase decision. Such trends help in converting kids into young adults who learn buyer skills at a young age.

2.4 Legal and Ethical Concerns Related To Pester Power

Pester Power is no more a phenomenon restricted to a particular region or nation but transcends across borders as children have universally become more powerful than ever and wield a great influence over their parents. One of the major contributions of pester power with respect to health issues is the concern for obesity amongst children. While many factors such as reduced physical activities, increased snacking especially junk food, biological tendencies may be held responsible, a lot of researchers have special mention about the television advertising and its possible cumulative effects on the tender minds of children. From an international perspective, the amount of media children are exposed to in various countries is increasing, and could lead to even greater changes in children’s consumer socialization worldwide. With ever increasing marketing stimuli targeted at children, different nations have taken different steps to combat this issue. Some have put legal penalties for disobedience of the law while some nations put it under ethical concerns. Though there is a dearth of cross-national comparative studies related to pester power, a brief overview on the socio-cultural environment and regulatory measures help us understand the dynamics related to pester power in different countries like China, Japan, UK, US, Australia and Europe.

a) China

Chinese market though relatively poor often gives great marketing potential because of its humungous population of kids. As per the Population Research Burueau (1995),
China has not only the largest population of the world but also the largest population of children under 15 years of age (McNeal and Mindy, 2001). They further record that China has a long history of being an authoritarian society highly influenced by Confucianism and high power distance according to Hofstede’s Value dimensions. Therefore, it is more natural for young people to accept authority from opinion leaders, including older people and family elders. China traditionally followed a more patriarchal society based on power distances. However, a content analysis conducted on children’s TVCs in China detect the shift in power in the Chinese society from the elderly to the young, resulting mainly from its one-child policy of 1979 and the growing aspirations of the Chinese children for western lifestyles. Due to this, urban Chinese children often receive most of the love and attention of both parents as well as that of four grand parents often indulging and improving their spending potential amounting to the phenomenon stated as “4-2-1” indulgence factor by Cutler (1988) and “Six Pocket Syndrome” by Goll (1995) (as cited by McNeal and Mindy, 1996). They also quote that such children often are denoted as “little emperors” or “spoiled brats” due to over-indulgence.

**b) Japan**

Japan also witnessed birthrate decline thereby developing a similar trend of indulgence - “five pocket child” who receives larger gifts of money such as ‘O-toshi-dama’ (New Year’s Money ranging from 500 to 10,000 yen depending on the child’s age and family’s wealth and generosity) from several sources like parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours and others (Suzuki, 2005). In their cross-national study of children (Ward, Robertson, Klees, and Gatignon (1986) have reviewed past literature reporting that children in Japan are more indulged than their other counterparts though Japanese children are encouraged to “stand in” with culturally-defined groups and show lifelong emotional dependence on the family. They also observe that in response to pestering from children, Japanese parents prefer to use reasoning and persuasion as against
physical punishments and guilt-inducement. Unlike American families where conflict is expected, harmony is more stressed in Japanese families.

c) United States

McNeal (1992) based on his research has provided sufficient evidence to consider that children under age 12 years, comprising 20 percent of the population, independently spend over $6 billion annually on direct and indirect purchases together. Realizing this huge potential, many marketers are now seeing children as a lucrative segment to be developed. American families encourage autonomy, advocate individual achievement, and begin independence training when children are very young (Rose, Bush, and Kahle, 1998). Though US sees captive advertising as highly offensive, the spending power of children up to 12 years of age, as cited by Lawlor and Prothero (2002) amounts to $28 billion of personal spending and $250 billion of influenced family spending.

d) Australia

Australia, in order to combat pester power does not allow advertisements during programmes for pre-school children. It limits advertising within children’s programmes or within a few minutes of those programmes. In an attempt to reduce childhood obesity, the Parents Jury committed to reducing childhood obesity has lashed out McDonalds Happy Meals Ads by giving it the Pester Power Award twice in a row (Soni and Upadhyaya, 2007).

e) United Kingdom

Parker (2001) pointed out that in U.K., parents spend on an average £7.00 more when supermarket shopping with children than without them. U.K. has a more detailed code of practice to regulate advertisements aimed at children (Independent Television
Commission, 1991) which requires adequate disclosure of product information and avoidance of misleading presentations of products. As found by Devereux et al. in 1969, British children are more independent and come to identify with peer groups at an earlier age than their other counterparts (Ward et al., 1986). Besides, British families are more likely to use physical punishment in response to pesterering children.

**Europe**

The number and frequency of television advertisements targeting children in Europe are growing extensively with marketers touching their lives more directly than ever before. Europe is more liberal towards reaching children in the classroom with ‘educational campaigns’ (be it for cereals, CD-ROMS, books on nutrition) than using the traditional medium of television (Stewart Allen, 1999). Sweden is often benchmarked for its staunch approach as it bans any form of terrestrial television advertising to under-twelves. This was the result of Erling Bjurstrom of Sweden National Institute for Working Life who reported about the gullibility of this age segment which proved a catalyst for the ban as he found that younger children are incapable of distinguishing between advertising and program content (UNESCO, 2001 as documented by Mallalieu, Palan, and Lacznia, 2005). The same is also seen in Norway. Greece imposes selective bans on advertising for toys. Denmark and Finland prohibit commercial sponsorship of children’s programming.

**SUMMARY**

The global children’s market holds tremendous potential, yet the research literature in this domain – cross-cultural differences with respect to pester power, family structure and communication patterns and its impact on children buying behaviour seems to be inadequate. However, irrespective of the national borders, children across the globe are
now enjoying more power than ever. The reasons stemming from various socio-cultural, psychological and commercial environments have been elaborately discussed. Some of the major drivers of Pester Power are – Changing family structures, lack of quality time, single parent families, Hyper-parenting, Monetary gifts received by kids, greater need for self-expression, Peer pressure, Growing consumerism and materialism, Stealth marketing strategies, Retail communication, highly Media-savvy kids and early exposure to consumption habits. International differences with respect to marketing environment, legal policies, advertising regulations, socialization habits and cultural values lead to differences in the way pester power grows and is controlled across different countries. The next chapter explicates various child development theories to have a better understanding of the psychological and cognitive aspects related to various stages of development in children.

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