

Teenagers' use of alternative shopping channels: A consumer socialization perspective

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Abstract

The consumer socialization (CS) perspective is applied to explore factors that influence a developing consumers' use of different shopping channels—mall and Internet. The effects of channel involvement, access to funds, access to the channel, and socialization agent communication on adolescent shopping and intentions are examined using a high school student sample. Results indicate that involvement with a channel has a major influence on agent communication, time and money spent, and future intentions to shop in that channel. Agent communication was also found to influence shopping behaviors and intentions. Differences between channels are noted. Additional findings, implications, limitations, and future research directions are also presented.

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Introduction

American adolescents are growing up with the Internet. It pervades their daily lives. They are as comfortable with computers and the Internet as previous generations were with television. Teens, who are learning to be consumers, are the Internet shoppers of today and the future. But they are also the mall shoppers of today and the future. Therefore, we ask: What are the factors that influence a developing consumer's propensity to utilize alternative shopping channels (the Internet and the mall) for shopping and purchasing? The distinctive buying habits they display today will likely follow

them as they enter their higher spending years of young adulthood (Neuborne and Kerwin 1999). However, as Haytko and Baker (2004) and Mangleburg et al. (2004) point out, teens are a substantial consumer market about which there is little academic research.

To better understand this important market segment, this study seeks to investigate adolescents' usage of two shopping channels—the mall and the Internet—from a consumer socialization (CS) perspective. Investigating shopping channels phenomena is consistent with previous research (cf., Wallace et al. 2004; Mathwick et al. 2002, 2001; Tang and Xing 2001). The mall was chosen because it represents a traditional venue in which developing consumers learn to shop and purchase. We also chose to examine how they are socialized in a relatively new and exciting shopping channel—the Internet. First, literature regarding adolescent shopping patterns and CS is provided. Next, a theoretical model and hypotheses, based on relevant literature and depth interviews with teenagers, are presented. Data are gathered from high school students across both shopping channels and our results

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are presented for both the mall and Internet, followed by a discussion of the findings. Implications for retailers and directions for future research are also provided.

Literature review

Adolescent shopping patterns

Generation Y (Gen Y), an age cohort consisting of 60 million people born between 1979 and 1994, is the largest consumer demographic group to hit America since the baby boomer generation (Neuborne and Kerwin 1999). This generation is the first to be comfortable with the idea of transmitting information via a computer. Because Gen Y has used the Internet since preschool, they are likely to go online for news, weather, information, and research as well as recreation and “human contact” through chat rooms and the like (Noble and Noble 2000). Nielsen Media Research reports that younger teenagers today spend fewer hours watching television than the eighteen to 49 age segment, and spend more time online than any other demographic group (Noble and Noble 2000). Teens are technologically savvy and will soon drive the digital economy (Tweney 1998). Already, thirteen percent of all American teenagers have their own credit cards, which allow them to easily shop on the Internet (Gunter 2004). Therefore, how teens are socialized relative to the Internet is of great interest to practitioners and academicians alike.

The traditional channel through which adolescents become socialized as consumers is the mall. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the mall was considered to be the “in” place to shop and socialize, but recent trends suggest that mall shopping is on the decline, especially for non-teen segments (Nicholls et al. 2002; Pacelle 1997). However, according to Teenage Research Unlimited, 75 percent of teens aged thirteen to seventeen spend an average of four hours a week “hanging out” and shopping at the mall (Hovanesian 1999). While only 55 percent of Americans aged 21–62 like shopping, 88 percent of girls between thirteen and seventeen like to shop at malls and they spend an estimated \$85 billion a year (Brooke 1998). Haytko and Baker (2004) found that these girls go to the mall for a variety of reasons, including the number and variety of stores available and comfortable surroundings.

An overview of consumer socialization (CS)

Our goal here is to examine some of the factors that produce greater utilization of particular channels—specifically, the mall and Internet. The CS perspective is helpful for this investigation. CS is defined as the process by which young people acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to become functioning consumers in the marketplace (Ward 1974). This perspective has been applied to a wide variety of consumer-related topics, including the influence of parental style on children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of consump-

tion and advertising (Rose 1999; Rose et al. 1998; Carlson et al. 1990; Moschis 1985; Grossbart and Crosby 1984), the influence of socialization agents on brand sensitivity (Lachance et al. 2003), the influence of television advertising on children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of consumption (Sherry et al. 1999; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Reece and Kinnear 1986; Grossbart and Crosby 1984; Churchill and Moschis 1979), ethnic differences in CS (Singh et al. 2003; Bush et al. 1999; Shim and Gehrt 1996), and cross-cultural patterns in CS (Rose et al. 2002; McNeal and Ji 1999; Rose 1999; Sherry et al. 1999; Rose et al. 1998).

The model of CS initially presented by Moschis and Churchill (1978) is based on the communication socialization perspective (McLeod and O’Keefe 1972). There are five key variables in this model. The first is *age* or *life-cycle position* (LCP), which is when socialization takes place in an individual’s life. It is the point at which cognitions and behavior patterns change (Churchill and Moschis 1979). The second variable is *social structure constraints* affecting learning. These are variables such as social class, gender, and race. They serve to associate an individual in a social group with relatively homogeneous behaviors (Moschis and Churchill 1978). The third variable is *agent* or *source of the influence*. This is a person or an organization directly involved in socialization because of frequency of contact with the individual, primacy over the individual, and control over rewards and punishments given to the individual (Brim 1966). The fourth variable is *learning processes* involved in socialization. This refers to the ways in which the learner acquires specific values and behaviors from these socialization agents (Churchill and Moschis 1979). Finally, the fifth variable is *content* or *criterion behavior*. This refers to the values, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors necessary for the performance of a given social role (Churchill and Moschis 1979).

The manner in which these five variables are linked together is as follows: Social structure variables and age or LCP are antecedents to socialization processes, which include both the socialization agent and the type of learning process actually operating. Socialization processes then directly affect the content or criterion variables. Thus, the CS perspective suggests that consumer behavior is acquired through various interactions between the learner and various agents (i.e., parents, peers, school, etc.) in specific settings. Drawing on both this perspective and our qualitative research, we next present our hypothesized model of how adolescents become socialized to specific shopping channels.

Model and hypotheses of adolescent shopping behavior

A review of the marketing literature reveals that no studies have specifically considered the CS factors that influence a consumer’s propensity to use a particular shopping channel. Particularly lacking is research on developing consumers’ socialization to the Internet, which is especially needed today

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