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The Changing Face of Pester Power

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Pester power's coming of age – children's growing involvement in household decision-making

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Have you recently been at the receiving end of a child making a purchase request for something? Or have you ever observed a supermarket scene where a child implores a parent or family member to buy something specific? If so, you have witnessed the practice of pester power – one of the most controversial areas in marketing today.

At a very general level, pester power refers to children's influence on family purchasing and consumption behaviour, whilst more specifically, it refers to children posing precise purchasing requests to parents or other family members. In order to understand the phenomenon of pester power, it is useful to consider the financial significance of the child market to commercial interests. Children can act as both consumers and influencers, as well as being the customers of tomorrow. Firstly, as consumers, children constitute a market in their own right with spending power often coming from pocket money, payment for household chores, and gifts. To give an example, according to the 2018 Ulster Bank Communion Survey, the average total cash gift received by a child on the occasion of a first Holy Communion was €558. The survey also reported that approximately 49% of children shared some of their wealth with siblings or made a charitable donation, whilst toys were the number one purchase for children.

Secondly, children exert substantial influence on family purchasing decisions relating to areas such as food and entertainment, but also with regard to big ticket items such as the choice of family car and house. For example, a 2018 Harris Poll Survey was undertaken in the US on behalf of SunTrust Mortgage and found that 55% of homeowners sought their child's opinion in the purchasing decision for a new family home. According to the survey, at the top of the child's wish list was his/her own bedroom (57%) followed by a large back garden (34%) whilst further down the list, was a wish to live near friends (24%).

Finally, children constitute a future market where childhood consumption patterns and brand preferences may spill into adulthood. For example, various studies have identified that children aged as young as two years can recognise logos for well-known brands in the car, fast food and sportswear sectors. The resulting conclusion is that this recognition and familiarity with brands at an early age may positively affect their brand preference and loyalty later in life.

Concerns have been raised about triggers of pester power, with the focus often being placed on the marketing of certain foods, which may subsequently influence children's food choices, consumption, and health. Furthermore, the practice and outcomes of pester power tends to generate substantial societal disquiet in terms of the potential for parent-child conflict. Indeed, the term 'pester' can carry negative connotations such as the 'nag factor', conjuring up images of unrelenting purchase requests being placed to beleaguered and harassed parents in busy shopping settings. Many academic studies in this area have highlighted the disappointment and unhappiness that can arise when a parent refuses a child's purchase request.

However, this is the traditional view of pester power, and whilst the situations outlined above still prevail, there is an alternative viewpoint to consider. There is an evolving perspective in academic and practitioner discourse, that the child-parent dynamic relating to purchasing

requests and decisions is also a normal part of growing up within the family unit where children are flexing their metaphorical muscles in terms of seeking to influence parental purchase behaviour. For example, the consumer socialisation perspective depicts the journey through childhood as a learning curve during which children acquire consumer-related knowledge, skills, and behaviours, and these skills accrue from interacting with parents, peers, and the media. In a 2011 research paper which I co-authored with Dr Andy Prothero (UCD), the study comprised a series of interviews and focus groups with 52 children aged 7-9 years of age. The focus of the paper was to explore children's thoughts on pester power and to investigate how they posed purchase requests to their parents, and the outcomes of a parent acceding to or refusing a request. In a very small number of cases, children referred to feeling annoyed and disappointed when a purchase request was refused. Instead, the prevailing theme was that of an air of resignation and stoicism. As one seven year old girl volunteered:

“I wouldn't really mind but, when I was smaller, I didn't actually understand but, now that I'm older, I understand that I have a brother and a sister and they need some things as well. I just understand that I can't get everything I need”.

This nuanced and reasoned approach to pester power is also emerging in contemporary research which suggests that parents are increasingly involving children in household purchasing decisions. Again, this contrasts the traditional view on pester power which depicts parents as the 'put upon' recipients of purchasing requests. The nature of the family unit is changing, with family structures now encompassing for example, a greater female presence in the workplace, delayed childbirth, an increase in single parent families, and an evolving view of the nature of fatherhood. In a 2017 research study conducted by Viacom in Australia, an interesting insight was given into fatherhood with 97% of fathers suggesting that the key role that they play in their child's life is not often echoed in the media or advertising in Australia. Viacom's Research Director opined “today's dads are more hands-on, present, proactive and interested. They're more of a companion or friend. They are rational, patient, understanding and they're a lot more affectionate and nurturing than their parents were with them”.

Another key theme in Viacom's research was that parents include their children in family purchase decisions by seeking their advice and guidance. This theme also arose in a 2017 research study in the UK by communications agency Krow and their research partner, YouGov that sought to explore family decision-making processes with 4,024 parents of children aged four years plus. An interesting finding related to a parental preference for the input and involvement of their children in household purchasing decisions. For example, four family types were identified, namely 'practical planners' or parents who operate on a budget but will involve family members in household decision making; 'control seekers' or parents who take sole charge of purchasing decisions; and 'plate spinners' or parents who are trying to manage household bills. However, the largest group of parents (32%) fell into the 'conscious nurturers' category. They deliberately seek out their children's input in purchasing decision-making, believing that it is important for the child's development.

In summary, the traditional perspective on pester power has tended to focus on the practice and its outcomes, such as parental refusal of a purchase request often leading to unhappiness and conflict. This can and does still occur today. However, another more nuanced perspective on pester power is to view it as an exchange or conversation whereby a parent(s) involves a child in both a purchasing decision and the rationale for making this decision. Notwithstanding

whether or not the child gets their way, this level of interaction is a valuable life lesson and constitutes part of the child's consumer socialisation into the marketplace.

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