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Young children's influence on family consumer behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to understand young children's influence on family consumer behavior by examining children's and parents' points of view in the Brazilian context.

Design/methodology/approach – Through an exploratory approach, the study used focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Specifically, to elicit children's perceptions, two focus groups were conducted, and to capture the perspective of the parents, 8 families, via 12 participants, were interviewed.

Findings – Children's use of information provided by the media in their attempts to influence family decisions is perceived positively by parents because such behavior helps parents to fulfill their parental duties.

Research implications – This study examines how young children perceive their influential role in family consumer decisions and how parents perceive this influence, given the existence of child adultization and adult infantilization.

Originality/value – The findings extend the discussions regarding the adultization of children and the infantilization of adults, revealing positive aspects of such a trend in association with consumer behavior.

Keywords Consumer behavior, Family, Children, Adultization, Infantilization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Children can influence family decision-making across a variety of products and services (Ebster *et al.*, 2009; Wu *et al.*, 2010; Chitakunye, 2012; Marshall, 2014). Children have access to a large amount of information because of a modern environment that offers consumers unprecedented access to communication technologies (Broniarczyk and Griffin, 2014). The simultaneous use of various forms of media, including televisions, computers and mobile phones, is a common practice, even among young children (Wisnblit *et al.*, 2013). Although media use at a young age has consequences regarding attitudes and behavior of children (Asplund *et al.*, 2015), parents are presumed to be increasingly self-centered (Bernardini, 2014); therefore, they might not be alert to children's access to media. What effect does the lack of parental attention and young children's extant access to information have on family consumer behavior?

A vast amount of previous literature has examined children's influence on family consumer decisions, primarily during the 1970s and 1980s (Davis, 1976; Atkin, 1978; Jenkins, 1979; Isler *et al.*, 1987; John, 1981; Swinyard and Sim, 1987). As stated by Kerrane and Hogg (2011), research over the past years has established that family members tend to influence each other in purchase decisions, with children playing an important role within



this context. A number of strategies have been identified to be possibly used by children in their attempts to influence their parents, including requesting, bargaining, using emotions, using reasoning and forming coalitions, among others (Gaurer *et al.*, 2013). Even though there are some controversial findings regarding aspects such as the stage of the buying decision process in which influence tends to be higher, or demographic factors suggested to affect the level of influence (Kerrane and Hogg, 2011), the strategies children tend to use seem to be associated with their age and cognitive capabilities (John, 1999; Thomson *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, family dynamics have changed significantly in recent years, thereby demanding attention to consider this new reality (Flurry, 2007; Gram, 2015). In addition, children are spending ever-increasing amounts of time using media (Wisensblit *et al.*, 2013), also as sources of information that extend beyond the family unit (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Associated with extant exposure to media are the concepts of the “adultization of children” and the “infantilization of adults”, which have been approached by authors from various fields through terms including *adult-child* (Postman, 1985), *infantilized minds* (Greenfield, 2003; Quill, 2011), *adultescents* and *kidults* (Bernardini, 2014). According to Postman (1985), the wide access to information provided by the media promotes the adultization of children and the infantilization of adults. This paper uses the term *adultization*, referring to children prematurely behaving as adults, and the term *infantilization*, referring to adults adopting juvenile behaviors.

For example, girls wearing make up at a young age would be a consequence of adultization, and adults following an ideal of remaining forever young would be reflecting infantilization (Postman, 1985). Although Postman (1985) uses a provocative tone when approaching this matter due to the rapid technological advances in today’s scenarios, media exposure and access to information are increasingly facilitated. On the one hand, it becomes difficult for parents to keep track of the information children might have access to, which would lead to adultization (Buckingham, 2013); on the other hand, juvenile attitudes are highly promoted by the media, making it acceptable for adults to adopt infantilistic behaviors such as escaping from responsibilities (Bernardini, 2014).

That does not mean parents tend to be irresponsible, but as pointed out by Bernardini (2014), there is an ideal of fun and being carefree, which would lead parents to find some difficulties having to dedicate their time and efforts toward children. Ultimately, apart from the chronological age determining the differences between children and adults, adultization and infantilization might be taking place at some level or in specific contexts. With regard to these contemporary phenomena, family consumer behavior has yet to be addressed; specifically, no previous studies have examined how young children perceive their influential role in family consumer decisions and how parents perceive this influence, given the existence of child adultization and adult infantilization.

To address this research gap, this study aimed to understand the influence of 7- to 11-year-old children on family consumer behavior, and more specifically on the decision to buy a product or service, given the increasing exposure to media and easy access to information. In other words, the study explored young children’s influence on family purchasing decisions, in light of the possible adultization of children and infantilization of adults, using children’s and parents’ points of view.

The study was developed in Brazil, and this age group (7-11 years old) was chosen because of the need for further research with young children as participants (Marshall, 2014), besides the understanding that these children have already been exposed to multiple types of media and have begun to develop personal preferences. At this age, they are also capable of discussing their experiences and perceptions and expressing their own

ideas (John, 1999), at the same time that, even though they might be adultized, they are still dependent upon their parents, who tend to be influential in shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Lenka and Vandana, 2015). Therefore, as suggested by Marshall (2014), the study aimed to obtain the children's views regarding their consumer behavior, complemented by parents' views.

Children as consumers

In marketing literature, three primary research perspectives have emerged regarding the consumer behavior of children:

- children have individual preferences regarding products purchased by their parents;
- children begin to have their own money and become buyers of products for their individual use; and
- children influence decisions regarding products to be shared by family members or regarding products to be used by one of the parents (for instance, a daughter might criticize a dress that her mother is intending to buy for herself, resulting in her deciding not to make the purchase) (Sheth *et al.*, 1999).

Research on children's consumer behavior is often based on the consumer socialization paradigm, which asserts that there is a "process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p. 2). According to John (1999), such a process occurs in the following three stages:

- (1) perceptual stage (3 to 7 years old);
- (2) analytical stage (7 to 11 years old); and
- (3) reflective stage (11 to 16 years old).

As a child develops cognitively and socially, he/she moves from one stage to another. At the perceptual stage, children's capacity to negotiate and to influence is limited. At the analytical stage, those skills begin to emerge, eventually developing into a full repertoire of skills at the reflexive stage. Although this categorization has been criticized (De la Ville and Tartas, 2010), it is still applied in recent studies (Marshall, 2014).

The conceptualization of consumer socialization stages supports the assertion that the age of a child is a relevant factor (Nadeau and Bradley, 2012). Indeed, different studies reveal teenagers' capacity to influence family consumer decision-making (Palan and Wilkes, 1997; Thomson *et al.*, 2007; Cunha and Neto, 2015). Palan and Wilkes (1997) identified that adolescents tend to perceive reasoning as an effective strategy to influence their parents in purchasing decisions. In a recent investigation regarding parents' views on such an influence, Cunha and Neto (2015) noted that the perceived strength of teenagers' influence tends to vary according to the type of product or service. The authors suggested that one explanation could be the level of involvement of the teenager with the object or service to be purchased, affecting his/her motivation to participate in the buying decision process.

In another approach, Kerrane *et al.* (2012) explored children's influence strategies on parental consumer decisions, focusing the intra-familial processes which lead to strategy emergence. Through a sequence of interviews with parents, with children and with the family groups (including parents with children aged from 3 to 21 years old), the authors found that children's purchase influence tends to emerge within the family context, as a result of interaction and learning processes. In a different approach (having undergraduate students and their siblings and parents as participants on a survey study), Cotte and

Wood (2004) had already identified parents and siblings to be important reference groups in consumer socialization. In consonance with the suggestion that studies of child influence should further explore the relational action rather than children individualistic goals (Kerrane *et al.*, 2012), Gram (2015) investigated the collaborative processes in families' negotiations during food shopping. Based on an observational study of parent/child behavior in a supermarket context, the author focused on the roles played by parents and children (estimated to be aged 0 to 16 years old), and found the interactions to be mostly characterized by cooperation between them.

Focusing specifically on young children's perceptions, Marshall (2014) examined the experience of children (8-11 years old) as participants in family food shopping. The author suggested that children actively participate in the buying decision process in food retail environments, also in a cooperative way. Their strategies to influence decisions include, for example, requesting certain products such as sweets, cereals and products for their school lunchboxes or selecting products on behalf of other family members, denoting an attitude of cooperation. It is worth noting, however, that such focus on children and parents' cooperative behavior (Kerrane *et al.*, 2012; Marshall, 2014; Gram, 2015) constitutes a relatively new strand of research; earlier studies have mostly focused on children's coercive behavior, often referred to as *pester power* (Lawlor and Prothero, 2011), asserting that where children are involved there tends to be conflict. For example, a study conducted in the Brazilian context, investigating the influence of children (0 to 12 years old) on purchasing decisions at supermarkets, revealed that children tend to make several requests during the shopping experience, and parents seem to have difficulties in setting limits, yielding to most requests (Freitas-da-Costa *et al.*, 2012).

Overall, children's influence in family decision-making is a broad concept. In consumer behavior research, the influence of members of a family refers to the role each one takes in such a decision (Sheth *et al.*, 1999), and the influencer is considered "the person who tries to sway the outcome of the decision" (Solomon, 1999, p. 386). The present study considers children's influence as their ability to directly or indirectly modify opinions, attitudes, preferences and behaviors of the other family members, ultimately leading to some change in the outcome of purchasing decisions.

As previously mentioned, family dynamics have changed in recent years as new technologies have facilitated access to information. Despite the critiques found in existing influence studies regarding how it should be approached or measured, authors seem to agree that children are becoming increasingly influential within contemporary families (Flurry, 2007, Kerrane *et al.*, 2012). In a study which adopted a family perspective (using the family as the unit of analysis) and included children of various age groups as participants, Kerrane *et al.* (2012) identified the use of information collected from the internet among the possible strategies used by children to try to influence their parents' decisions. These authors suggested that specific age groupings of children should be explored in future research. Gram (2015) observed that even young children seem to be better informed about what to request and when than previous studies indicate. Related to this new reality are discussions regarding adultization and infantilization, which refer to children presenting adult behaviors and adults adopting immature attitudes, as addressed in the next section. Family consumer decisions are yet to be explored in light of these phenomena, a research gap fulfilled by this study.

Media exposure, adultization and infantilization

According to Postman (1985), because the development of mass media communications has made information widely accessible, the frontier between adulthood and childhood has ceased to exist. The author postulated that images of war, sex and violence, as well as

advertising messages aimed at all age groups, have resulted in children becoming adultized and adults remaining juvenile. In spite of this being a provocative statement by Postman (1985), Bernardini (2014, p. 40) notes that in today's scenarios, adolescent life models are constantly promoted by the media, creating "an era in which it is practically normal to refuse to accept one's own age".

In fact, the conceptualization of childhood and adulthood is a social artifact (Postman, 1985; Netto *et al.*, 2010). Over the years, cultural meanings and practices have resulted in a blurred conception of the socially constructed categories of child/youth/adult and their dividing lines. Among the explanations of child adultization and adult infantilization, exposure to media is a salient consideration (Buckingham, 2013), pointed out as a major antecedent of such phenomena.

The implications of children's extant exposure to media is a recurrent topic in different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, medicine and public policy (Schor, 2004; O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Asplund *et al.*, 2015; Kasser and Linn, 2016). Schor (2004) asserts that new methods of capturing children's attention and imagination from television to the internet and public spaces have led to a transformation in family purchasing dynamics. The author notes that because of marketing efforts toward children, their influence ranges from requesting a certain brand of cereal to participating in the decision-making process of purchasing a car.

In a recent study, Lenka and Vandana (2015) identified parents and peers as more influential than environmental agents such as television ads and elements at a retail store in shaping the attitude and behavior of young children (7 to 12 years old). The same study found that the influence of this age group on parents depends primarily on parental style, which refers to parents' attitudes toward their children as reflected in the emotional tone between parent and child (e.g. authoritarian or nurturing). This style affects parental practices or the behaviors through which parents perform their parental duties (e.g. to tell the child what must be done or to discuss an issue). Wisenblit *et al.* (2013) found that parental style and practices are important variables regarding the amount of children's media exposure and regarding the parents' awareness of such an exposure, which have consequences on children's development as consumers.

According to Postman (1985), the media content to which children are exposed results in adultization. Wisenblit *et al.* (2013) notes that families have a major responsibility in monitoring media exposure, given that children are at risk of being manipulated. Buckingham (2013) acknowledges that children will certainly have increasing access to media. However, he notes that although one approach is to view children as vulnerable, another approach is to consider that children's experience with new technologies will prompt them to exceed their parents in this regard. Either because they might be manipulated or because they tend to easily deal with new technologies, increased access to media seems to result in some level of children adultization.

In a parallel development, adult infantilization is also associated with information provided by the media. According to Bernardini (2014), based on the logic of capitalism, marketing efforts now target adults promoting goods and services which previously were aimed at adolescents and children. For instance, clothing fashions present youthful images, whereas television schedules feature fun and entertainment. The author further illustrates this point by noting that the most successful movies and the best-selling books (e.g. Harry Potter) are geared toward children, suggesting a nostalgic vein promoted by the media system, with consequences for the attitudes and behaviors of adults in contemporary Western societies. As a result, Bernardini (2014) observes, there has been a change in the following classic indicators of adulthood:

- a steady job;
- a stable relationship;
- housing and financial independence; and
- parenthood (Lee, 2001).

Adopting a different approach, Quill (2011) suggests that the association of adulthood with following a life course toward work, marriage and parenthood has changed because of the effects of new technologies on the economic context. The risks and insecurities of the work environment in the information age has prompted individuals to extend their education, to seek further qualifications, to stay home with parents or to return home after graduation or later in life, thus infantilizing individuals. According to Bernardini (2014), this lack of compromise regarding stability is reinforced by the media and helps to explain the increasing number of people getting divorced, remarrying and postponing parenthood. The same author asserts that because such juvenile behaviors are promoted by the media, they become tolerated in contemporary society, which would lead to a growing culture of infantilization, meaning that even though an ideal of maturity remains, there is also an ideal of fun and being forever young as life models.

Another implication of this juvenile ideal would be a transformation in the way that parents interact with their kids. For instance, as infantile adults tend to value their own individual interests (Bernardini, 2014), they would tend to allow children to spend time entertained on the internet because that is less demanding than dedicating attention to them. Even though parents might be concerned about the use of the internet by their children (Livingston, 2003), at times the ideal of fun and being carefree can lead them to look the other way. In fact, Wisenblit *et al.* (2013) suggest that the likelihood of setting limits and talking with children about the information they are exposed to is associated with parents' style. In this sense, infantilization would also affect the level of parents' awareness regarding children's media exposure and the degree of yielding to their consumer requests.

Interestingly, a study by Thomson *et al.* (2007) showed that teenagers (approximately 13 to 15 years old) might use previous knowledge and information from different sources in their attempts to justify purchase requests and to influence family consumer decisions. The findings by Kerrane *et al.* (2012) also indicated that teenagers might use such an influence strategy. This occurrence was viewed as beneficial by parents in both studies (Thomson *et al.*, 2007; Kerrane *et al.*, 2012), suggesting that children's use of information is crucial in understanding their influence over family. Likewise, the increasing access of even younger children to information (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011) should be taken into consideration in understanding family consumer behavior.

In sum, given the extant exposure to media that seems to be leading to some level of adult infantilization and child adultization, how do young children and parents perceive their consumer behavior and, more specifically, how do they perceive children's influence with regard to family buying decisions?

Method

The objective of this study was to examine the influence of 7- to 11-year-old children on family consumer behavior in light of the possible adultization of children and infantilization of adults. Specifically, the study investigates such an influence using children's and parents' points of view.

In the study, the children's perspectives were complemented by the parents' perspective, including single-parent families. Through an exploratory approach, the study used focus

group discussions with children aged 7-11 years old and in-depth interviews with parents of children in this age group. According to [Darbyshire et al. \(2005, p. 419\)](#), “while quantitative, survey and experimental studies are vital, they cannot by themselves provide all of the information and insight required to appreciate children’s experiences”. Thus, following other studies with young children as participants ([Marshall, 2014](#)), a qualitative approach was undertaken for examining the perceptions of children; more specifically, group discussions were conducted because studies indicate this to be a valuable method for eliciting the views and experiences of children aged 7-11 years old ([Morgan et al., 2002](#)). Likewise, in accordance with other studies which explore children influence in family decision-making, in-depth interviews were utilized to capture the parents’ points of view ([Kerrane et al., 2012](#)).

To elicit children’s perceptions, two focus groups were conducted. A total of 19 children (10 girls and 9 boys) participated. The children were between 7 and 11 years old and thus presumed to be at the analytical stage of the consumer socialization process, when important developments in terms of consumer knowledge and skills tend to occur ([John, 1999](#)). According to [John \(1999\)](#), children in this age group are able to express their own ideas and to understand the perspective of others; they already make thoughtful evaluations and have begun to develop a repertoire of negotiation and persuasive strategies. That is the reason why this categorization was used for the selection of participants. There were ten children in Group 1 and nine children in Group 2, including a balanced number of boys and girls. Similar to [Marshall \(2014\)](#), both groups included children of both genders, as difference of gender was not the focus of the research.

The focus groups were convened at a private, middle-class school in Porto Alegre, a major Brazilian city. After meeting with the head of the school and obtaining proper authorization, one of the researchers personally explained the purpose of the study to the teachers in the targeted grades. These teachers invited their students to participate, and those who opted to participate acquired written consent from their parents through a previously prepared letter describing the research project. The two group discussions were conducted in a school classroom that was familiar to all participants. Prior to the discussions, all children confirmed their willingness to participate. Moreover, to avoid any feeling of coercion given the school setting, during the process, they were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that they were not being under any kind of evaluation; they were also reminded that they could opt out of the research process at any point.

Both groups were guided by a psychologist experienced in this research technique and who specialized in children. The psychologist was previously briefed by the researchers to follow a guideline for covering the subject. This guideline included the following topics: rapport, items children enjoy buying, when/how they shop, shopping with parents, desired objects, use of electronic devices (television, computer, tablet, smartphone), level of independence (own electronic devices, allowance) and parental practices (involvement in daily activities, communication with the child, making consumer decisions). The choice for an experienced psychologist to conduct the focus groups was due to the expertise and skills required to promote enriched discussions, ensuring contributions from all participants, especially when involving young children. However, one of the researchers was also present to help the psychologist with the dynamics and to make sure the topic at hand was fully covered. Each group discussion lasted approximately 60 min; both were taped and later transcribed for analysis.

To capture the perspective of the parents, in-depth interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers of children aged 7 to 11 years old, including four couples and four single parents (41 to 50 years old). A total of 8 families, via 12 participants, were interviewed after

accepting the researchers' invitation at the front entrance of the school in which the focus groups convened. Note that, the goal was to get the view of parents of children aged 7 to 11 years old, including couples and single parents; due to this selection criterion, they were not the parents of the children who had participated in the focus groups. Once these parents opted to participate, they were asked to provide their contact information. A follow-up was made by phone, and the interview was then scheduled to be conducted at a convenient place and time.

Each interview followed a guideline regarding the main topics to be addressed, as per the guideline used for the focus groups. Although couples were interviewed together, the focus was on making sure that the topics were covered (rather than focusing on the amount of participation by each parent), the same way as on the interviews with single parents. The average interview length was 90 min. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis, with the previous consent of respondents.

It is important to note that neither the guideline for the group discussions nor the interview script focused on a specific product or service category. Instead, as previously mentioned, the questions allowed participants to report on any items children enjoy buying and their consumer behavior in general.

Data analysis was conducted following the procedure postulated by Bardin (2009). The procedure included a pre-analysis categorization of the data and an exploration of the material, culminating with the processing of the results. First, the transcripts of the focus groups were fully reviewed, leading to the identification of categories; these categories emerged from the data after common issues and themes were identified in the discussions. Based on these categories, the transcriptions were further explored in search of examples that supported or challenged such an understanding. In parallel, the same procedure was adopted in the analysis of the data collected through the parent interviews. Each step of the process and all of the findings were discussed among the researchers to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

Prior to its development, the research project was approved by an academic committee and the results reported on this paper were also formally evaluated by this committee.

Results and discussion

Young children's influence: children and parents perceive that such an influence exists

Previous research regarding children as consumers has focused on children's individual preferences for products bought by their parents, purchases made by the children and children's influence on the purchases of products and services to be used by the family or to be consumed by parents (Sheth *et al.*, 1999). In this study, it was possible to identify these behaviors using both the children's and the parents' reports. The following examples from the participants illustrate one such behavior:

I talk to him [son] to understand more or less what he wants [clothing], and then I buy it. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes not, so I return it or he comes along to help decide. (mother, married)

When she [mother] goes to the supermarket, I tell her what I want and then she buys it. (child, male, 8)

Children explained their own attempts to persuade their parents about desired products, indicating that they tend to be very demanding; however, the children recognize that they might not have power regarding the outcomes, admitting that they do not always receive what they want. At the same time, however, the children appeared to be independent,

reporting that they can make decisions to purchase products with their own allowance, as shown in the following example:

I do my stuff and so I earn it [allowance]. [. . .] Yes, I have already bought lots of things with my own money. (child, male, 11)

The children also reported to participate in decisions to purchase family products. For example:

I told my dad, he is going to buy a new car, so I told him, he needs to buy a big one, not the sportive one he's been thinking of buying, because I don't like that kind of car, and really, my friends won't fit in that car. (child, female, 10)

Thus, the reports revealed children's behaviors of asking and demanding. Notably, children in single-parent families appeared to exert stronger influence than those in two-parent families, corroborating previous studies about single parent behavior (Atkin, 1978; Gunter and Furnham, 1998). The parents' reports indicated that when a child lives under shared custody, miscommunication between mother and father, disagreements about parental practices or simply guilt by one of the parents led to compensations or privileges for the children, as illustrated by the following example:

When they [kids] spend the weekend with their dad [. . .], they spend it in front of the computer, they do lots of online shopping [. . .], things that are extremely useless, because it's really easy to press on the keyboard and insert the credit card number. This is something that has upset me a lot [. . .] because my way of doing things is different [. . .], and of course this interferes with other things, too. (mother, single-parent)

Overall, the reports corroborate the assertion that children actively participate in family consumer decisions regarding products and services that are bought for the child, for shared consumption among family members or for the parents. Extending the findings by Thomson *et al.* (2007) regarding the influence of teenagers in the family purchasing behavior of products of high involvement (e.g. car, holidays), this study indicates that younger children can also exert such an influence.

Additionally, parents explain that they tend to consult their children regarding various purchasing matters, whereas children note that they are often consulted by their parents about products and services in a range of categories, including food, smartphones, cars, tourism destinations, hotels and schools. Thus, corroborating the assertion by Kerrane *et al.* (2012) regarding children becoming increasingly influential within contemporary families, across a wide range of product categories, the present study indicates that young children can also exert such an influential role regarding various products and services.

Children's perception: children can demonstrate knowledge about the subject

According to John (1999), children between 7 and 11 years of age are already capable of understanding information from the marketplace beyond their own feelings and motives; they can understand commercial intentions and the perspective of their parents. At this age, children tend to thoughtfully evaluate products and services, a characteristic which emerges in their attempts to influence their parents to purchase desired items. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that the categorization postulated by John (1999) has been criticized; De la Ville and Tartas (2010) state that the author based it only on perceptual skills, which could not be sufficient to explain how children interpret and act toward marketing stimulus (e.g. advertising). However, the present findings corroborate that children aged 7-11 years old, presumably in the analytical stage, seem to be developing

(have not yet fully developed) the knowledge structures that are necessary for them to deal with consumption situations as well as to be able to influence their parents.

This study also found that young children's influence on their parents' decisions tends to vary depending on the type of product or service. Moreover, the children appear to know that their potential influence is stronger in certain categories. This finding extends the results of [Cunha and Neto \(2015\)](#) regarding teenagers' influence on family decisions. As inferred by the same authors and based on the children's reports, this finding might be a result of the children's direct involvement with the purchasing item, prompting them to dedicate greater effort into influencing their parents in certain categories:

They [parents] ask me: do you really need this? And then I try to convince them. (child, female, 10)

What I like the most is Xbox [*game*]. So I really persist until I get it. (child, male, 10)

Children also indicate that they use various strategies in this process. A recent study by [Marshall \(2014\)](#), which investigated the behavior of young children (8-11 years old) in the retail food environment, noted numerous strategies that children use to influence their parents in supermarkets; the strategies included bargaining and negotiating with parents, primarily in a cooperative mode. Another study in supermarkets, conducted in Brazil, identified that children (up to 12 years old) tend to try to influence their parents using the low price of the products as reasoning ([Freitas-da-Costa et al., 2012](#)). These strategies were also revealed by the children's reports in this study, extending previous findings to other product categories such as toys, clothing, games and music, as illustrated by the following example:

I told him [father], I really need it and I will really use it [tennis shoes], cause that's what he says it is important to take into consideration. (child, male, 8)

All of the children in this study reported having access to their parents' smartphone, tablet or computer, and some owned their own devices, resulting in wide access to information. The children's reports corroborate that use of the internet and social media is becoming a routine activity of young children ([Wisnblit et al., 2013](#)). They reported using those devices often, primarily to communicate with friends and without much control from their parents regarding their online activities. Additionally, the children indicated that they have high levels of knowledge about certain products and brands, as illustrated by the following reports, possibly because of this wide access to information:

They [parents] ask us [children] what we think [regarding a product or brand] because we might have seen it on the internet, so they ask for our opinion. (child, female, 10)

I chose my mobile phone, I mean, she [mother] told me which one I could have, but I knew that it needed to have touch screen, I mean, she [mother] told me which one I could have, but I knew that it needed to have touch screen, and I wanted to be able to download the games that I like, so then I said OK. (child, male, 9)

As previously discussed, this extant media exposure tends to promote the adultization of children ([Postman, 1985](#); [Buckingham, 2013](#)). Indeed, [Netto et al. \(2010\)](#) analyzed the marketing communication efforts of a Brazilian renowned brand of kids apparel and suggested that advertising can contribute to adultization by teaching children beauty standards that are related to the adult world. In the present study, adultization was identified through the children's relationship and communication with their parents; for instance, the children had assignments and duties in taking care of themselves and their belongings, responsibly and on their own, also as criteria for earning their allowance,

meaning that chores seem to be associated with jobs. In terms of family consumer behavior, they reported being consulted often by their parents even concerning products not related to them, revealing that children have an active voice in these interactions. The following reports illustrate this statement:

She [mother] always asks for my opinion [. . .], if I say I didn't like it [art decor], she kind of becomes doubtful. (child, female, 11)

They [parents] ask me, what do you think of this, or ask, what about this phone, is it good? (child, female, 11)

The children's focus groups indicated the emergence of negotiation skills, as expected for the ages of 7-11 years old (John, 1999). Moreover, the development of negotiation strategies appeared to be associated with children's understanding that they must justify their demands to obtain the desired purchase. In this study, the children reported that they rely primarily on information provided by friends and older siblings, and they select information that they believe might be useful; the children also appear to understand that their chances of obtaining a desired item will improve when they present a persuasive argument:

What works the least [to convince parents] is talking about a television advertising [. . .] because it's obvious that [the ad's content] it's fake. (child, female, 8)

Sometimes we try to fool them [parents], and they say: do you think I was born yesterday? (child, male, 8)

Thus, the study demonstrated that young children can be demanding and impulsive, can test the limits, and can present "childish" behavior. At the same time, the children had a clear perception of their ability to influence parents' consumer decisions when consulted by their parents and particularly when they demonstrate knowledge using the information available to them. Indeed, these behaviors appeared to come naturally for the children, denoting some premature adultization. The exposure to numerous television channels, game options, smartphones, tablets and computers were part of the children's lives. These resources appeared to produce more consumer aspirations at the same time that young children are realizing they can use these experiences and information to their advantage.

Parents' perception: parents recognize their difficulties and value children's cooperation

The literature examining adult infantilization suggests that the major indicators of adulthood have changed, as has the idea of following a life course toward stability involving marriage and parenthood (Quill, 2011; Bernardini, 2014). This study focused on adults who opted to get married and have children and also on adults who decided not to stay married, thereby becoming single parents.

Participants experienced difficulties in their role as parents. With regard to consumer behavior, the difficulties were primarily related to the demands of parenthood and the challenges of balancing parenting with obligations of being away from home, like in work-related trips, leading adults to succumb to their children's demands. The following examples illustrate this challenge:

Once I went on a trip for about fifteen days, and before travelling I bought a really expensive toy for him [son] [. . .] I knew I was doing that as a means of compensation, since I am going to travel, I am going to be away from him, so I will buy him this big thing he's been asking for. (father, married)

I live alone, and she [daughter] only spends every other weekend with me [. . .]. People are very busy, lots of activities, so I guess it's a matter of compensating for the lack of attention [. . .] Because of the life style [. . .], educating is demanding. (father, single-parent)

It is difficult to educate, it is much easier to say yes to everything, saying no is difficult, you know? (mother, married).

The various reports indicated aspects that can be associated with some level of adult infantilization, in terms of adopting juvenile behaviors, although participants did not mention that explicitly in the interviews. Among these indicators, prioritizing immediate solutions, rather than future benefits in dealing with children's requests, revealed to be a salient one. That does not mean parents will overlook children's needs or wellbeing, but it seems they tend to make decisions toward their children considering their own interests as well, aiming for a win-win situation. The following reports illustrate such an interpretation:

For instance, if you take them [children] to a place where they want to go, it's smoother, because they are happy [. . .] dealing with their dissatisfaction is demanding, so you want to avoid that [. . .]. (father, single-parent)

Sometimes I just say yes, I don't think too much [. . .] it's easier. (father, married)

In this sense, a conflict appears to exist between those behaviors and parental duties, and this conflict tends to be reflected in the manner in which parents address their children regarding consumer decisions. For instance, buying things to satisfy children's demands may be a way to compensate for absence and lack of attention; at the same time, this behavior might also mean that parents do not have the persistence to address the situation and instead opt for an easy way out or, as suggested by Bernardini (2014), perhaps they have difficulty regarding responsibility because of their self-centered focus. The following report, of a participant referring to "other people", illustrates such an inference:

People today are not very mature, they are selfish, so they try to compensate [. . .] they feel guilty, so they buy something to their kids [. . .]. (father, single-parent)

Notably, the parents in the study perceived children's participation in family buying decisions as beneficial, primarily when this participation facilitated their function as educators and led to good decisions. For instance, when children demonstrated effort and knowledge about a certain product, such as a game for themselves, a smartphone or a new television set for the family, their influence in decision-making was perceived positively. The following statements illustrate this concept:

I think it's positive [the daughter's influence]. For example, a new phone, they [children] are updated; they already know type of product, pricing and everything. (mother, single-parent)

He [son] wanted to buy a loudspeaker [. . .], he looked at pricing, chose the brand and all [. . .] I think sometimes he is more organized than me [. . .] I think this is a learning process for his adult life. (mother, married)

As previously discussed, the children indicated that although they tend to use various strategies, they perceive that they have a better chance of obtaining what they desire when they use knowledge, which denotes premature adultization. Interestingly, the parents perceive this behavior as a sign of maturity, which can facilitate dealing with the children's demands. Parent reports indicate that they value their children's cooperation and negotiation using reasoning:

She [daughter] explained to me, based on what she makes as an allowance, saying that the cost of that [desired item] was equivalent to the allowance. (father, married)

She [daughter] asked for eight songs; I negotiated with her and so I let her buy five. (father, single-parent)

Final remarks

This study examined family consumer behavior in light of the adultization of children and the infantilization of adults. Specifically, the study explored the perceptions of children aged 7-11 years old regarding their influence on family consumer decisions, complemented by parents' view. The study found that such an influence tends to be strong, as noted in previous studies (e.g. [Marshall, 2014](#)), adding that young children and parents are aware that this influence exists. In line with relatively recent research that identified cooperative behaviors between children and parents in shopping experiences ([Kerrane et al., 2012](#); [Gram, 2015](#)), the present study also found that children's influence on parents' decisions can be more cooperative than a struggle. The findings indicate that such an influence can occur in purchasing decisions of products and services in a wide range of categories, complementing previous studies with children of this age group ([Marshall, 2014](#)).

Moreover, one major finding was that children's use of information in their attempts to influence family decisions is perceived positively by parents when this behavior helps them with their parental duties; in turn, children perceive that they can use knowledge to be heard and to obtain what they seek. The use of information has been previously identified among the strategies which children might use to influence parental decisions ([Bartsch et al., 2011](#); [Kerrane et al., 2012](#)); however, the finding that parents tend to appreciate when young children (aged 7-11 years old) use information they gathered beyond family limits, to help them make decisions, had not been identified.

In this sense, the present study indicates that although media exposure can promote the adultization of children and the infantilization of adults ([Postman, 1985](#)), the same conditions appear to also promote children's use of information to communicate with their parents, which is perceived as beneficial. According to the various reports, despite their young age children had wide access to media information and adopted behaviors toward their parents that demonstrated some level of premature adultization; conversely, adults had difficulty parenting and exhibited behaviors that can be associated with adult infantilization. The findings suggest that even young children can present adultitized behaviors toward infantilized parents in the consumption context. Given that controlling children's information access is practically impossible ([Buckingham, 2013](#)) and that adults' infantilized behaviors affect parent-child relationships ([Bernardini, 2014](#)), despite the classic hierarchical configuration and adults' financial resources, family dynamics might be increasingly characterized as a partnership in regard to consumer decisions. This concept provides an interesting path for further research.

It is worth noting that the fact parents have more dialogue and get advice from their children does not mean they are not good and adult parents. Indeed, the children who participated in this study did not complain about their parents' behavior. However, as illustrated previously, there seems to be configuring a more horizontal line in terms of how children and parents interact. The set of findings indicate that infantile behaviors of parents, such as being immediatist rather than persistent, tend to reinforce children adultization, with impact on family consumer decisions. This same horizontal configuration might also affect other aspects of family life.

As asserted by Bernardini (2014, p. 40), this is “an era that is characterized by young people who want to be adults and adults who want to be young”. The present study did not explore the dichotomy of adultization and infantilization but rather investigated family consumer behavior in light of both phenomena taken separately. Given that there seems to be a trend for children to be adultized and adults to be infantilized, at least at some level in some situations or specific contexts, investigating the possible continuum in between and among such concepts could be another path for future studies.

Notably, another behavior addressed in related literature is *pester power*, which refers to children’s strategy of adopting a pestering behavior toward parents when seeking a desired item (Lawlor and Prothero, 2011; Lenka and Vandana, 2015). Although this type of behavior was not the focus of this study, the study showed that children can be demanding and parents are often inclined to say yes. By accessing children’s view on pester power, Lawlor and Prothero (2011, p. 561) found that children between 7 and 9 years old already understand the various responses that parents make regarding purchase requests and perceive the outcome of this interaction to “constitute more of a good-natured game between parent and child, [. . .] as opposed to the negative overtones of conflict indicated in the literature”. However, future studies might investigate these two possibilities (adultization and pester power) together because the infantilization of adults appears to open room for both possibilities. In this sense, it would be worth exploring the understanding that children can be “childish” and adultized, and parents can be “mature” and infantilized, rather than approaching adultization and infantilization as extreme phenomena like in current literature.

It is also important to note that this study was developed in the Brazilian context. On the one hand, the way that information has become widely available is unprecedented and a global phenomenon; for example, internet access has significantly increased in the USA (USA Census Bureau, 2014), in European countries (Eurostat – European Statistics, 2016) and also in developing countries like Brazil (Cetic, 2016). However, the fact that educational styles, child rearing, gender roles, family structure, labor market demands, social class, etc. tend to vary among different countries would be an interesting path for future research regarding the influence of young children on family consumer behavior. Another study developed in the Brazilian context found significant levels of materialism among children (9-14 years old), presumably associated with family behavior, corroborating studies developed in other countries (Santos and Souza, 2013). Likewise, even though the literature applied in the present paper is mainly British and North American, the findings indicate that adultization and infantilization seem to be a trend also in Brazil. That means the findings on the present study can be considered supplementary to studies developed in other contexts. Yet contextual and cultural differences can be further explored in future studies about such phenomena.

Despite this study’s exploratory nature, the findings might lead to interesting managerial insights. For instance, on the one hand, there are the parents’ difficulties regarding their parental duties; they recognize that they lack time and should be persistent in dealing with their kids. On the other hand, even at a young age, children realize that they have improved chances of obtaining a desired item when they demonstrate knowledge about the subject, relying mostly on the internet and friends as information sources. The study also indicated that both parents and children tend to have reservations toward advertising. Overall, these findings suggest that other communication strategies, such as content marketing associated with a brand and specific online content targeted toward parents and young children, might be more valuable to both groups. According to the findings, there is a good chance that the children will share this content with their friends and so will their parents.

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