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Beyond the Parent-Child Pair: Children's Influence in Extended Families

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Abstract: Research on children's influence in family purchasing assigns household members to roles and treats the influence process as a negotiation conducted between a child and a parent. That specification carries an unstated structural assumption: that the adult a child petitions is the adult who controls the purchase. In much of South Asia, the Arab world and Southeast Asia the assumption does not hold, because grandparents and other kin are resident and hold standing in household consumption. This paper argues that the decision-role model is under-specified for such settings, and that the missing element is directional. Recent work establishes that family structure conditions how parents socialise children; what remains unmodelled is the reverse path, in which a child recruits a third party to carry a request the parent has refused or has not yet heard. Drawing on social power theory and on evidence from India, Jordan, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China and Croatia, the paper adds a coalition-partner role to the standard set and specifies mediated influence as a pathway parallel to direct influence. Six propositions follow. The central implication is that estimates of children's purchase influence obtained from dyadic instruments are systematically low in multigenerational households, by a margin determined by household composition rather than by children's persuasive capacity.

Keywords: family decision making; children's influence; consumer socialisation; extended family; social power; emerging economies; India.

Introduction - A child in a multigenerational household who wants a packet of biscuits has more than one adult to ask. If the mother refuses, the grandmother is in the next room, and in many such households her agreement carries enough weight to settle the matter. The standard account of family purchase decisions contains no description of what has just occurred.

That account is well established and has been productive. Households allocate purchase functions among their members, and research on children has concentrated on the influencer function, asking how far children's sway extends and through what behaviours it operates (Foxman et al., 1989; Kim et al., 1991; Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Williams & Burns, 2000). Fifty years of work have established that children's influence is substantial and rising, that it varies systematically by product category and by the child's age, and that parents moderate it through identifiable communication and mediation styles (Ward, 1974; Moschis& Churchill, 1978; Carlson &Grossbart, 1988; John, 1999; Rose et al., 2002; Mikeska et al., 2017; Sigirci et al., 2022). The literature has since extended into digital and social-media environments (Bassiouni& Hackley, 2014; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2021; Williams & Willick, 2023; Carroll et al., 2024), into nutrition and food policy (Swindle et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2022; Binder & Matthes, 2023; Mulligan et al., 2023, 2025), and into questions of children's critical competence as advertising audiences (De Jans et al., 2017; Packer et al., 2022; Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2022).

The productivity of that programme has obscured an assumption built into its foundations. The role model presumes a household of two generations in which the adult a child addresses is the adult who commands the purchase. Where those conditions obtain, direct child-to-parent negotiation is a complete description of the influence process, and instruments measuring request frequency and strategy repertoire capture what there is to capture (Cowan & Avants, 1988; Marquis, 2004; Dikcius et al., 2019). Where the conditions do not obtain, the description is partial, and the partiality is not random.

The conditions fail across a large share of the world's households. Extended and multigenerational structures remain prevalent in India, Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia to a degree unfamiliar in North America, and most assumptions about the family in consumer research derive from Western and particularly American households (Kapoor et

al., 2024). In India the arrangement in which a married son continues to live with his wife and children in his parents' home is common, and parental ties carry weight comparable to that of the spousal bond (Kapoor et al., 2024). Kaur and Singh (2006) argued two decades ago that Indian children's influence follows a route distinct from the Western pattern and that reviews of the field had failed to register the difference; the observation has been repeated in subsequent Indian work without being developed theoretically (Soni & Upadhyaya, 2007; Jeevananda&Sunitakumar, 2012; Sharma &Sonwaney, 2015; Shefali & Aggarwal, 2019; Valli, 2019; Ravi &Varkala, 2020; Arora & Diwan, 2022; Harikishni& Attree, 2022; Ansari et al., 2024).

Two recent contributions have moved the field toward these settings, and the present argument is best positioned by stating what each establishes and what each leaves open. Hota and Bartsch (2019) compared nuclear, stem and extended structures using Indian data and reported that consumer socialisation varies across them, with extended-family parents inculcating conformity and obedience where nuclear-family parents encourage consumption independence. Kapoor et al. (2024) examined household composition and parental style in relation to Indian parents' regulation of children's media exposure. Both demonstrate that household structure is consequential, and both model it as a condition shaping what adults transmit to children, so that the causal arrow runs from the household through the parent to the child. The same directionality characterises the cross-national parental-style literature more broadly (Rose et al., 1998, 2003; Yang et al., 2014).

The reverse arrow motivates this paper. A household containing several adults with consumption standing contains several adults a child may approach, and the child's selection among them becomes part of the influence process rather than a fixed parameter of it. A refusal need not close an episode; a request may be routed through a sympathetic third party rather than pressed against a resistant one, and coalitions may form across generations. None of this appears in the role model, and none of it is registered by instruments that ask how often children request things from their parents.

Fragmentary evidence that the phenomenon exists is nonetheless available. Instruments developed for South Asian and Arab settings have found it necessary to include items concerning the recruitment of other household members, an addition absent from the Western taxonomies on which they otherwise draw (Cowan & Avants, 1988; Kim et al., 1991; Williams & Burns, 2000). Ghouse et al. (2026) document decision-making roles in Arab households extending beyond the parent-child pair. Studies conducted in Nigeria, Jordan, Ghana, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, urban China and Croatia report patterns of children's involvement that their authors describe as departing from Western findings without pursuing the structural explanation (Williams & Veeck, 1998; Wimalasiri, 2004; Akinyele, 2010; Bamfo et al., 2019; Munir et al., 2020; Saleh Huneiti, 2021; Sirasa et al., 2023; Varga et al., 2024). This evidence sits scattered across national literatures and has not been assembled into a theoretical claim.

This paper assembles it. Three objectives follow. The first is to identify the structural assumption embedded in the decision-role model and to specify the conditions under which it fails. The second is to develop a revised framework adding a coalition-partner role and separating mediated influence from the direct influence that existing instruments capture. The third is to derive testable propositions and to state what the revision demands of instrument design. The contribution is conceptual, and no new data are presented; what is claimed is that a widely used model carries an unstated boundary condition, that a substantial proportion of the world's households lie outside it, and that the resulting mis-specification produces an error in estimates of children's influence whose direction is predictable.

Theoretical Background

Children's influence and the decision-role model: Family purchase decisions are conventionally analysed by distributing functions across household members, with one member raising the possibility of a purchase, another shaping which option is selected, another committing to it and another executing the transaction. Roles may be concentrated or dispersed, and their allocation shifts with product category, decision stage and family type (Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Palan & Wilkes, 1997; Wang et al., 2007).

Applied to children the framework has been generative. Children are treated as initiators and influencers but seldom as deciders or buyers, since they typically control neither the household budget nor the transaction itself, and the research question becomes how far the influencer function extends. Answers have been sought through the frequency of requests (Buijzen& Valkenburg, 2003; Watkins et al., 2021), the repertoire of tactics deployed (Cowan & Avants, 1988; Marquis, 2004), the categories in which influence concentrates (Kümpel Nørgaard et al., 2007; Baldassarre et al., 2016; Arora & Diwan, 2022), and the degree to which parents accede (Lawlor & Prothero, 2011; Chaudhary et al., 2022; Studer-Perez & Musher-Eizenman, 2022).

Instrument development has followed the framing with unusual consistency. Cowan and Avants (1988) catalogued children's influence strategies as behaviours directed toward a parent. Kim et al. (1991) examined adolescents' power and influence in relation to parental purchase decisions. Williams and Burns (2000) explored the dimensionality of children's direct influence attempts, and the modifier is diagnostic, since the attempts of interest are those made directly. Dikcius et al. (2019) developed and validated a scale of children's influence on parental purchase decisions specified throughout as a dyadic construct, as did Sharma and Sonwaney (2015) in an Indian setting. Work on the parental side shares the specification, characterising the family communication environment through the parents and treating

children's influence as exercised upon them (Carlson &Grossbart, 1988; Rose et al., 1998; Mikeska et al., 2017; Lapierre et al., 2020; Garibay et al., 2024).

Social power and the possibility of coalitions: The one strand of this literature that supplies conceptual apparatus for what follows is the application of social power theory to children's influence. Flurry and Burns (2005) analysed children's purchase influence in terms of the bases of power available to them, arguing that influence outcomes depend on the resources a child can bring to bear rather than on persistence alone. Kim et al. (1991) had earlier examined adolescents' power alongside their strategy repertoire, and Ironico (2012) characterised children as active agents in consumption rather than passive recipients of socialisation. Social power theory is useful here because it treats influence as relational rather than dispositional. A child's capacity to secure a purchase is a function of the configuration of the household, not only of the child's persuasive skill. That framing admits a possibility the decision-role model does not accommodate: where a household contains an actor whose endorsement moves the decider, the child's power includes access to that actor. Coalition formation is a standard object of analysis in the study of small-group decision-making, and its absence from the children's influence literature reflects the two-generation household in which that literature was developed rather than any theoretical objection.

Family structure in consumer research: Family structure has appeared in this literature, though usually as a control or as a moderator of parenting rather than as an explanatory variable in its own right. Geuens et al. (2002) examined the role of family structure in children's influence on family purchase behaviour. Iþýn and Alkibay (2011) reported socio-economic gradients in children's influence among Turkish families, and Nairn and Opree (2020) found socio-economic status conditioning advertising effects on materialism. Cross-national comparisons have attributed observed differences to culture and communication pattern (Rose et al., 2002; Wimalasiri, 2004; Wang et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2014; Lapierre & Rozendaal, 2019).

Hota and Bartsch (2019) advanced this considerably by comparing nuclear, stem and extended structures directly, and Kapoor et al. (2024) extended the comparison to household composition and media regulation. Both establish that structure matters. Neither, however, asks what a child does differently when several adults are available, because in both the child is positioned as the recipient of socialisation rather than as an agent selecting among targets. It is that question the present framework takes up.

The Dyadic Closure Assumption and Where It Fails: Read together, the body of work surveyed above assumes that the set of adults a child may address and the set of adults who control purchases are the same set, and that this set contains at most two members. We term this the dyadic closure assumption: influence episodes open and close within the child-parent pair.

The assumption is nowhere stated, because in the households where the instruments were developed it approximates truth closely enough to require no statement. A child refused by one parent in a nuclear household may appeal to the other, and the literature has treated this under the heading of spousal coalition in family decision-making, but the appeal remains within the parental unit and there is no third generation to approach. Dyadic closure is therefore a boundary condition rather than an error, and it becomes consequential only when the model is exported to households that violate it, which is precisely what has occurred as the field has extended into emerging economies (Kaur & Singh, 2006; Akinyele, 2010; Munir et al., 2020; Ghouse et al., 2026).

Three features of multigenerational households defeat the assumption, and they compound rather than merely coexist. The first is the presence of several adults holding consumption standing. Where grandparents are resident, the parent is not the only adult whose agreement can produce a purchase; grandparents may hold budgetary authority, may make discretionary purchases for grandchildren without reference to parental approval, or may command sufficient moral standing that their endorsement is difficult for a parent to overrule. The child accordingly faces a choice of addressee that a child in a nuclear household does not face, and that choice is itself a consequential behaviour.

The second feature is asymmetric permissiveness. Where several adults hold standing, they are unlikely to share identical dispositions toward children's requests, and grandparental indulgence is a sufficiently widespread pattern that its existence needs little defence. Where such a gradient exists it is available for exploitation, and the child's operative question extends past whether to ask, to whom. This is a different cognitive operation from the persuasion modelled in existing work, since it requires the child to hold a comparative model of several adults simultaneously.

The third feature is that refusal ceases to be terminal. In the dyadic case a parental refusal ends the episode unless the child escalates, and escalation through repetition, emotional display or persistence is what pester-power research observes and measures (Lawlor & Prothero, 2011; Chaudhary et al., 2022; Binder & Matthes, 2023). In the multigenerational case refusal redirects the episode rather than ending it. Escalation and redirection are distinct behaviours with distinct observable signatures, and an instrument constructed for the first will either miss the second or misclassify it as an absence of influence.

Hota and Bartsch's (2019) finding sharpens the problem rather than resolving it. If parenting in extended families is more restrictive and more oriented toward conformity, then direct child-to-parent influence should indeed be lower in those households. But a more restrictive primary route raises rather than lowers the value of an alternative route. Taking the structural feature seriously yields the opposite prediction to the one their design can test: direct influence falls while mediated influence rises, and a dyadic instrument

would record the combination simply as diminished child influence.

A Revised Framework: We propose adding a fifth role to the standard set. A coalition partner is a household member who holds consumption standing, does not control the focal purchase, and can be recruited by another member to advance a request. The role is defined functionally rather than by kinship position, so that a resident grandparent is the paradigm case but an aunt, an older sibling with earned income, or a non-resident relative in frequent contact may occupy it. What qualifies a member is that their endorsement alters the probability of purchase without their being the decider.

The coalition partner is distinguishable from the influencer by the direction of the relationship. An influencer acts on their own preferences; a coalition partner is enlisted to act on someone else's. The distinction matters because it makes the child's recruitment behaviour, rather than the partner's independent preferences, the object of study, and it is recruitment behaviour that existing instruments do not capture.

With the role specified, two pathways connecting the child and the purchase can be distinguished. Direct influence runs child to decider, and this is the pathway existing work models and existing instruments measure: the child asks, argues, pleads or persists, and the parent accedes or refuses. Mediated influence runs child to coalition partner to decider, so that the child's target is not the person controlling the purchase but a person capable of moving that person. The behaviours involved differ in kind rather than degree, comprising the selection of an addressee, the framing of a request for a third party's sympathies rather than the decider's, and the timing of an approach to moments when the partner is present. The two pathways are not mutually exclusive and may operate in sequence, with mediated influence typically following an unsuccessful direct attempt, or simultaneously, as when a child raises a request in the presence of both adults so that the partner's reaction becomes available to the decider.

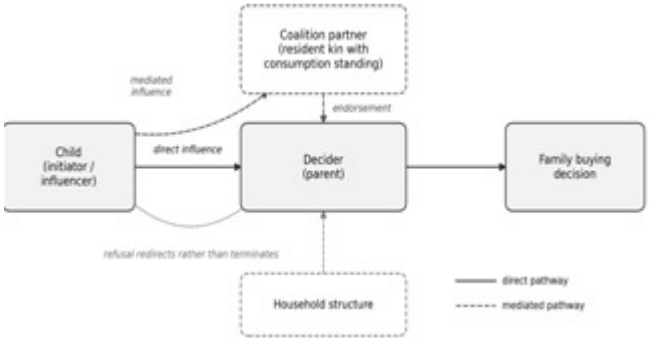

Fig. 1 Revised framework of children's influence in multigenerational households. The solid line traces the direct pathway modelled in existing work. Dashed lines trace the mediated pathway proposed here. The dotted line indicates redirection following refusal.

The revision changes what an influence estimate means. An instrument measuring only direct influence will record the direct component and treat the mediated component as absent, producing an estimate biased downward in proportion to the share of household influence activity travelling the mediated route. It also relocates the parental gatekeeping construct, which in the dyadic model is a single filter between request and purchase but in the revised model becomes a property of the household configuration, since several adults may filter and they may filter inconsistently (Nicholls & Cullen, 2004; Williams & Willick, 2023). Most consequentially, household structure becomes an explanatory variable within the influence process rather than a context conditioning what adults do, and this is where the framework departs from Hota and Bartsch (2019) and Kapoor et al. (2024).

Propositions:

P1. In households containing coalition partners, children employ mediated influence in addition to direct influence, such that total influence attempts exceed those observed in nuclear households of comparable size.

P2. Mediated influence occurs more often following an unsuccessful direct attempt than as an opening move, making the two pathways sequentially rather than simultaneously ordered in the majority of episodes.

P3. The likelihood of mediated influence increases with the permissiveness gradient between the decider and the available coalition partner, and approaches zero where resident adults hold similar dispositions toward children's requests.

P4. Mediated influence is disproportionately deployed for hedonic and discretionary categories, in which a coalition partner's indulgence is socially sanctioned, and is rare for utilitarian categories, in which the decider's authority is less contestable.

P5. Instruments measuring only direct child-to-parent influence underestimate children's total purchase influence in multigenerational households, and the magnitude of the underestimate increases with the number of resident adults holding consumption standing.

P6. The restrictive parental orientation reported in extended families (Hota & Bartsch, 2019) is associated with lower direct influence and higher mediated influence, so that total influence differs from that in nuclear households by less than direct measures indicate.

The framework's usefulness rests on P5 and P6. Both are falsifiable using an instrument covering both pathways administered across household types, and a null result on either would indicate that the mediated pathway, while real, is not consequential enough to justify the added specification.

Implications: Consumer socialisation theory holds that children acquire consumption competence through interaction with socialising agents, of which the family is primary (Ward, 1974; Moschis& Churchill, 1978; Thorson &

Horstman, 2016). The framework proposed here implies that in multigenerational households the family is not one agent but several, potentially divergent in orientation, and that navigating that divergence is itself a socialisation outcome. A child who has learned which adult to approach for which category has acquired a competence the developmental sequence described by John (1999) does not name. The point connects to the reflective stage of that sequence, in which children become able to model others' perspectives, since selecting an addressee requires holding models of several adults and of the relations among them. If the account is correct, multigenerational households may accelerate the acquisition of perspective-taking in consumption contexts, though the framework generates that question rather than settling it, and work on children's executive function and emotion regulation would be the natural place to pursue it (Lapierre, 2016; Lapierre & Rozendaal, 2019).

The measurement implication is the most immediate. Instruments imported into multigenerational settings require items covering the mediated pathway, and those items are not translations of existing ones. Measuring how frequently a child asks a grandparent for things is insufficient; what is required is measurement of the child's selection among available adults and of requests deliberately routed through third parties. This bears directly on cross-national comparison. Where studies compare children's influence across countries using dyadic instruments, differences attributed to culture, affluence or media exposure may in part be artefacts of differential household structure. Rose et al. (2002), Wimalasiri (2004), Wang et al. (2007) and Yang et al. (2014) all undertake cross-national comparison of adolescent influence or parental style, and none had occasion to consider the structural coverage of the instruments employed; re-examination on those grounds would be informative.

For practice, the framework implies that child-directed communication in these markets addresses a decision unit containing more than one adult filter, and that appeals antagonising a grandparental audience may fail even where they succeed with the child. For policy the implication cuts against an assumption common in debates over advertising to children. Restrictions premised on interrupting child-to-parent requests address the direct pathway alone. If a meaningful share of influence travels a mediated route, the effectiveness of such restrictions is lower in multigenerational households than in the nuclear households where the underlying policy logic was developed. Given that children's critical understanding of advertising develops slowly (Lapierre et al., 2017; Packer et al., 2022; Rozendaal &Buijzen, 2022), and that the food categories at issue are precisely those P4 identifies as prone to mediated influence, the resulting gap is unlikely to be trivial.

Limitations and Future Research: The framework is conceptual and untested. Its propositions derive from a reading of existing findings rather than from data gathered to evaluate them, and the possibility that mediated influence is real but marginal cannot be excluded on present evidence.

The evidence assembled is uneven in coverage. It draws on studies from India, Jordan, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China and Croatia, but these were selected for relevance to the argument rather than identified through a systematic search, and no claim to exhaustive coverage of the field is made. India is over-represented relative to other multigenerational contexts, partly reflecting the volume of Indian work on children's purchase influence and partly our own greater familiarity with it. The empirical grounding should be read as illustrative rather than as a synthesis.

The coalition-partner role is specified functionally, which confers flexibility at the cost of operational tractability. Establishing which members of a given household hold consumption standing is itself a measurement problem this paper does not solve, and a kinship-based definition, while cruder, would be easier to apply.

The work that follows begins with instrument development: a measure covering both pathways, validated across nuclear and multigenerational households. Data collection then has to be dyadic or triadic, because parents cannot report reliably on requests routed around them and children cannot report on outcomes they do not observe, a divergence already documented between parent and adolescent accounts of the same influence episodes (ªener, 2011). Comparative testing across settings differing in household composition would then establish whether the mediated pathway is a South Asian particularity or a general feature of multigenerational living.

Conclusion: The family buying-decision model describes an influence episode opening and closing between a child and a parent. That description fits the households in which the model was constructed and fits less well those to which it has been exported. The mismatch is structural: where several adults hold consumption standing, the child's problem includes whom to approach as well as how to persuade, and refusal redirects an episode rather than concluding it.
Existing work has established that household structure shapes what parents transmit to children. The argument advanced here is that it also shapes what children are able to do, and that this second effect has gone unmodelled because the role model provides no place to put it. Adding a coalition-partner role and separating mediated influence from direct influence supplies that place. If the account holds, a straightforward consequence follows: published estimates of children's purchase influence in multigenerational settings are low, and they are low by an amount determined by household composition rather than by anything concerning the children themselves.

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