

## Children's Influence in Family Consumption Decisions: An Integrative Approach

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### *Abstract*

*This study takes an integrative approach to examining children's influence in family decision-making in Iran. To develop a conceptual model of children's influence, social power theory and consumer socialization theory were used. Social power theory appears to complement consumer socialization theory in explaining children's gains of consumer knowledge and skills from their parents. The research was conducted in 2013. This research is descriptive of survey type. The data was collected from 385 families, both from parent and children in 2 schools in north and center of Shiraz, Iran, to allow a comparison of perception in influence. Clustering sampling method was used to select our sample. Multiple regression method and confirmed factor analysis was used to analysis the data. Based on the research results we found that children apply expert, referent, reward, and coercive bases of active social power to perform influence attempts, either in the positive manner or in the negative manner. They perform these strategies to have greater influence on family purchase decision-making. Parents felt that their children use legitimate and coercive powers more than other powers. This means that parents perceived their children to be influential by using positive and negative ways. A new variable of family communication patterns was added to the previous models.*

**Key Words:** *Children, Family Decision Making, Influence, Social Power Theory, Consumer Socialization Theory.*

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### **Introduction**

Consumer socialization is defined as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2). After the initial consumer socialization process many children develop their own opinion and tastes about the products they want to buy (Turner et al., 2006). Contrary to the traditional assumption that parents dominate in family decisions, abundant research has found that children have substantial influence (i.e., influence on their parents) in family consumption decisions. Such academic findings actually parallel the reality in the marketplace. McNeal (1998) estimates that children 4 to 12 years of age influence approximately US\$188 billion annually in family related purchases. Thus, children's influence in family consumption decisions is a topic worthy of research attention both theoretically and managerially.

Two theoretical approaches have played leading roles in studying children's influence in family consumption decisions. They are consumer socialization theory and social power theory. The former theory views children as a socializee and parents as a major socialization agent (among others such as schools,

peers, and mass media). Under this theory, children are essentially passive learners and the socialization process takes place from parents to children (Peterson and Rollins 1987). Alternatively, the social power theory regards parents and children as partners in an interdependent relationship. Children possess relatively small degree of power over their parents.

To integrate these approaches, this research develops a conceptual model of children's influence based on consumer socialization theory and social power theory and tests the model with samples of children and their mothers.

## Litterateur Review

### Consumer Socialization Theory

Consumer socialization theory stemmed originally from the broader research in socialization that is referred as the process by which individuals develop, through transaction with other people, their specific patterns of socially relevant behaviors and experience (Zigler and Child 1969). Adapting the concept to marketing context, Ward (1974, p.2) defined the consumer socialization as "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace."

Under this theory, children are essentially passive learners and the socialization takes place one sided from parents to children (Peterson and Rollins 1987). For an instance, children learn consumption skills and knowledge from parents. Thus, consumer socialization could actually be a dynamic and bidirectional process. Guided by the consumer socialization theory, researchers have found that children's influence is affected by a variety of factors, including family variables (e.g., social class, family size, and family structure), children's characteristics (e.g., gender, birth order, and age), parents' characteristics (e.g., education, occupation, and consumption experiences), parenting style, and family communication patterns.

### Family Communication Patterns:

Family communication patterns are instrumental in the amount of influence that children exert on family decision in the present, and the way children will behave as consumers in the future. The socio-and concept-orientations are two patterns of family communication between parent and child. Socio orientation reflects a desire for harmonious interpersonal relationships in the family, and the measures may reflect the parent's efforts to achieve harmony through the emphasis of conformity and control. Accordingly, socio-oriented parents report an interest in telling their children to avoid controversy and arguments. In contrast, concept-oriented parents tend to consider communication a tool to convey and share views. Conflict, controversy, and resolution all can occur through candid discussion. They consult their children and value their opinions in purchase decisions even for products that are not for their own consumption (Carlson et al., 1990b; Moschis and Moore, 1979). Therefore, our hypothesis are formulated as follows:

H1a. There is a positive relationship between a child's perceived influence on consumption decisions and the level of concept-orientation held by the parent.

H1b. There is no relationship between a child's perceived influence on consumption decisions and the level of socio-orientation held by the parent.

Alternative view of socialization is captured by social power theory, which views the agent-child as a dynamic system and treats children as actors rather than receivers in the system (Cowan, Drinkard, and MacGavin 1984; Falbo and Peplau 1980; Howard, Blumtein, and Schwartz 1986).

### Social Power Theory

Social power theory considers parents and children as partners in an interdependent relationship with differing degree of power. When there is a conflict between children's and parents' view regarding a consumption decision (e.g., whether to buy a product, which brand to buy, when to buy, etc.), children might strategically use their power to persuade parents, thus gain influence in the decision making process (Cowan and Avants 1988; Cowan, Drinkard, MacGavin 1984; Kim, Hall, and Lee 1991). Thus, the theory embraces two important elements of power and influence attempts.

French and Raven (1959) identified power as consisting of five bases in social relationships, including (1) Coercive power—one's potential to administer punishment to the person influenced; Although one does not view children as possessing power to coerce their parents, psychologically, the threat of any negative or bothersome behavior of the child acts as coercion. (2) Reward power—one's potential to provide reward for the person influenced; from a child, rewards might include good behavior, completion of chores, or a display of affection. (3) Expert power—one's potential to supply superior knowledge and skill to the person influenced; in a family, it may be recognized that a child possesses itemized knowledge in certain product categories, such as toys and games, apparel, and certain grocery items (Flurry and Burns, 2005). (4) Legitimate power—one's perceived right to control the influenced person's opinion or behavior; Children have legitimate power when they are perceived to have the right to make a selection based on their vested interest in the product decision. (5) Referent power—one's potential to function as an identification object for the person influenced; also referred to as attraction power, referent power is exercised when one person conforms to the anticipated preferences of another person to feel closer to him/her.

### Passive and Active Social Power

In addition, Social power theory mentions that the five power bases may be utilized in two ways: passively and actively. Use of power to influence is usually active, or the result of deliberate action; however, occasionally it may be passive, such as when the only presence of power is powerful (French and Raven, 1959). Both active and passive social power contributed to a person's potential for guiding a result under his/her own preference. Thus, social power theory directs us to hypothesize that children exert influence via some combination of active and passive social power.

For a child, a power source is passive if the parent guesses its attendance and acts instead of any clear action on the part of the child. Influence is attributed to the child by the parent or the parent's perception of a child's unstated favorites (Wells, 1965). As children grow older, they affect family purchase decisions in a more passive way, as parents realize their children's likes and dislikes and make purchase decisions correspondingly (Roedder-John, 1999). In contrast, active social power is perceived and directly managed by the child. To exert active influence, a child must make an estimation of his/her social power capabilities, choose an influence attempts consistent with his/her sources of social power, and exert action toward obtaining his/her desired outcome (French and Raven, 1959). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2a: children whose parents perceive them to have more passive social power will be seen by the parents as having more influence in purchase decisions.

H2b: children who possess more active social power will employ more influence attempts than will children who possess less active social power.

### Influence Attempts

Social power theory conceptualizes power as the ability to influence. Because of the power advantage, the more powerful partner may act opportunistically to take advantage of the other partner in order to gain a

disproportional share of interests from his/her exchange (Bannister 1969). Thus, power is an important factor in determining partners' choice of influence attempts in a social relationship (Roering, 1977). According to power relational theory, during the parent-children interaction in family consumption decisions, children's perception that they have potential to influence their parents will likely lead them to exerting power in various strategic forms. Descriptive studies have documented that children use a number of different influence strategies, including, but not limited to, asking, pleading, bargaining, persisting, using force, telling, being demonstrative, sugar-coating, threatening, and using pity [Atkin, 1978], [Isler et al., 1987], and [Williams and Burns, 2000]. Kim, Lee and Hall's (1991) results showed that in purchasing goods for family use, teenagers who rely more on the "persuasion" and "playing on emotion" strategies and less on stubborn acts in their influence attempts perceive themselves as having greater influence. So children who use influence attempts will be able to influence on parental purchase decision. Based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Children who exert more influence attempts, have more purchase influence than children who exert less influence attempts.

### **Preference Intensity**

The idea of preference intensity (or "strength of preference") was introduced by Pareto (1927) and Frisch (1926); preference intensity involves the comparison of preference differences. The motivation for investigating preference intensity measurement comes from recent theoretical contributions that rely on such measures in both riskless and risky decision making (Farquhar and Keller 1989).

In general, relative preference intensity is the most important predictor of relative influence in the family setting. Relative preference intensity is how much more important the task goal is to one of the individuals involved. So individuals who have more intense preferences exert more influence on the other group member. On the other hand, the interaction of preference intensity with possession of each influence related resource predicts relative influence better than preference intensity and the resources alone do. This implies that the stronger a member's preferences are relative to the other member(s) the greater the effect his/her sources of influence will have and vice versa. The conceptual framework implies that a person is likely to use more influence when s/he cares more about the outcome. It is hypothesized that:

H4a: children with an intense preference for a particular decision outcome will exert more influence attempts than children with a less intense preference for a particular outcome.

In addition, it is hypothesized that:

H4b: children with more preference intensity for a product or service will perceive themselves to have more influence in purchase decisions than children with less preference intensity for a product or service.

### **Decision History**

Many purchase decisions are made by families and organizations rather than by individuals. This realization has motivated consumer behavior researchers to develop conceptual models of the group decision making process (Webster and Wind 1972). The focus here is on cooperative groups in conflict situations resolved by the use of power. A cooperative group is one whose members' primary goals are compatible (Corfman 1986). For example, the primary goals of family members are all likely to concern affiliation, security, and trust. We define power as the ability of one person to change another person's attitudes, beliefs, or behavior in an intended direction. The exercise of power is an act of changing a person that may or may not be deliberate. This is consistent with French and Raven's (1959) descriptions of

referent and legitimate power. We assume that the outcome of a group decision is a weighted function of the group members' individual preferences. The weights are determined by the relative influence of the members each individual's influence over the other. As such, a person's perception of his/her decision history in a similar purchase context should mold to some extent his/her perception of his/her potential for influence (Corfman and Lehmann, 1987). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H5: children who perceive that they are historically more successful in directing the outcome of similar purchase decisions will believe that they have more influence than will children who perceive that they are historically less successful in directing the outcome of similar purchase decisions.

**Children's Influence**

Consumer socialization theory views parent and child as a socializer vs. socializee relationship (Carlson and Grossbart 1988). Different from this view social power theory regards parent and child as two partners in a social relationship in which each partner provides some unique resources to satisfy the other's needs and desires (McDonald 1982). Thus, parents and children may hold power over each other In order to have influence over each other. Given the mutual nature of power and influence, it is essential to evaluate influence from the outlook of mother and children, as significant members of the decision -making process (Olson et al., 1975). Further, it should be expected that the perceptions of the mothers and children will be similar, but not identical (French and Raven, 1959).For these reasons, children's influence is measured from both the child's and the parent's perspectives. So it is hypothesized that:

H6: there is a reciprocal relationship between the child's perception of his/her influence and the parent's perception of the child's influence.

**Conceptual Development**

To do this research, a conceptual model was developed upon the study of family power. Conceptually, the model assumes that, child's ability to exert influence is mainly affected by his or her active and passive sources of social power, preference intensity, family communication patterns and decision history (see Fig. 1 for mutual dependence).

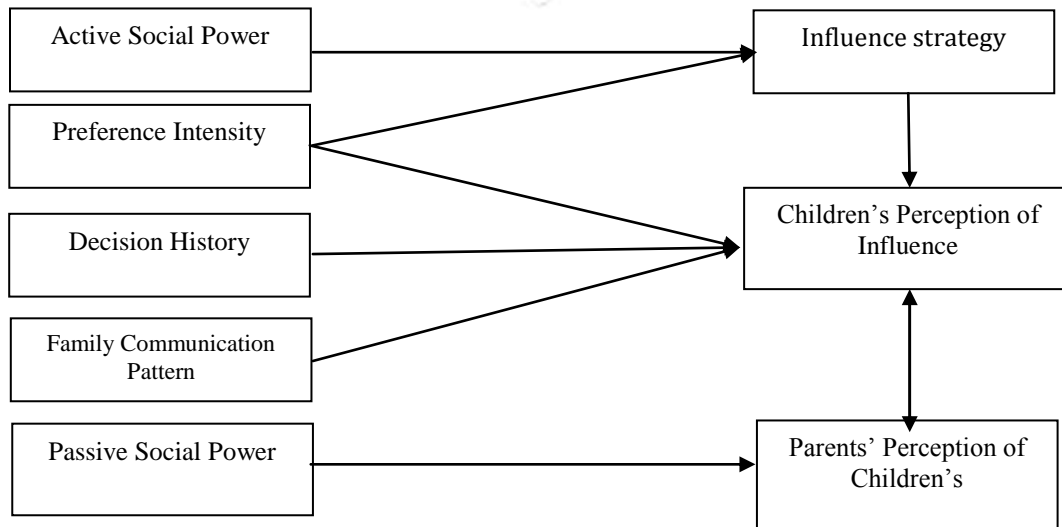


Fig 1. Conceptual model of this study

## Methodology

### Research Method

Family decision-making studies that focus on family roles require the collection of data from both the parent and the child (Darley and Lim, 1986; Kim and Lee, 1997). Consequently, the field research in this study was based on two questionnaire directed at the parent-child dyad, consisting of a children ages 8-11 and their mothers. Research suggests that children in the analytical stage are adaptive decision-makers, able to make independent decisions and self- estimation, and operate influence tactics to negotiate for desired outcomes [Roedder-John, 1999].

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included six demographic questions, which is proposed to have a significant impact on children's influence. In the second part, questions measuring the perceived influence of children on family purchasing decision-making and measuring both the socio-and concept-orientation. A Likert-scale ranging from "very seldom" to "very often" was used. The final questionnaire for Children consisted of 36 items and for mothers consisted of 25 items. Besides these items, demographic data were collected from the questionnaire. A total of 385 questionnaires were collected over a period of a month.

### Data collection and sample

The research was conducted in 2013. The data was collected from 385 families, both from parent and children in 2 schools in north and center of Shiraz, Iran, to allow a comparison of perception in influence. The family is the sampling unit of this study. In this context, children aged between 8 and 11 were included in sample. The reliability analysis for the items included in the questionnaires generated Cronbach Coefficient Alpha scores that is shown in The following table, which are higher than the adequate levels of internal consistency, as the minimum is stated to be 0.70.

Table 1. Cronbach Coefficient Alpha

Variables	item	$\alpha$	variables	item	$\alpha$
Active social power	14	.715	Passive social power	14	.818
Active expert power	3	.932	Passive expert power	3	.859
Active legitimate power	3	.937	Passive legitimate power	3	.765
Active referent power	3	.919	Passive referent power	3	.703
Active reward power	2	.866	Passive reward power	2	.742
Active coercive power	3	.882	Passive coercive power	3	.868
Influence attempts	14	.736	Preference intensity	3	.729
ask nicely	2	.838	Decision history	2	.790
Bargain	3	.836	Family communication pattern	8	.704
show affection	2	.817	Children's Perception of Influence	3	.90
display anger	3	.807	Parents' Perception of Children's influence	3	.92
Beg	2	.744	Children's questionnaire	36	.847
Fraud	2	.792	Parent's questionnaire	25	.841

## Measures

Adaptations of Swasy's (1979) social power scales were used to measure children perception of his/her expert power (three items, "e.g., I am skilled in purchasing my needed product), legitimate power (three items, "e.g., My mother is obliged to buy what I want her to buy), referent power (three items, "e.g., My mother cares what I think about the things she buys for me), reward power (two items, "e.g. I can reward mother when she buys what I want her to buy), coercive power (three items, "e.g., my mother, submit my idea in order to prevent my sadness).

Also researcher used Adaptations of Swasy's (1979) social power scales to measure parent's perception of her child's expert power (three items, "e.g., my child is skilled in purchasing his/her product needed), legitimate power (three items, "e.g., I am obligated to buy whatever my child want), referent power (three items, "e.g., I'll buy something that my child loves), reward power (two items, "e.g., My child has the ability to reward me in some manner when I buy what he/she wants me to buy), coercive power (three items, if I don't buy what my child want, he/she punish me with his/her misbehavior).

In order to measure children's perception of his/her influence attempts, we used Williams and Burn's (2000) scales. Six scales were used, such as asking nicely (two items, "e.g., I politely ask for it), showing affection (two items, "e.g., I show her how much I love her), bargaining (three items, "e.g., I say that I will do whatever she wants me to do), display anger (three items, "e.g., I hit something), begging and pleading (two items, "e.g., I keep asking), fraud (two items, "e.g., I say that I need it for school when I really don't). Decision history and Preference intensity were measured by two items and three items, generated by the authors. These items represented the child's perception of his or her general success in obtaining desired outcomes and their perception of product advantages.

In order to measure both the socio- and concept-orientation, we used Rose et al. (1998) scales. In the case of the socio-orientation scale, the four items were used by these authors were kept while the three-item measure for concept-orientation.

We measured children's perception of their influence with Cauanna and Vassallo's questionnaires. To measure this variable, we used three items, "e.g., Mum/dad take me where I want go. Adaptations of Beatty and Talpade's (1994) relative influence scales were also used to measure the mother's perception of the child's influence in purchasing child's needed items.

## Results

The sample for the examination of the structural model was 385 mother-child pairs. The structural model was estimated in LISREL 8.30.

The comprehensive fit indices for the structural model were above the supported range ( $\chi^2$  (df) =1346.46 (498)). Both the absolute fit statistics (GFI=.92, RMSEA=.084) and the relative fit indices (CFI=.96, IFI=.95, NFI=.93) suggested that the structural model fit the model adequately.

All factor loadings of constructs were tested at 5% error level, all factor loadings were significant at the 95% confidence level (t-statistic ranges out to -1.96 to +1.96 have been), and related structures of measurement have been able to make a significant contribution.

Fig.2 provides the Standardized structural estimates, and table 2 summarizes the Path estimates of the structural model for this study. In addition, construct validity assessment is shown in table 3.

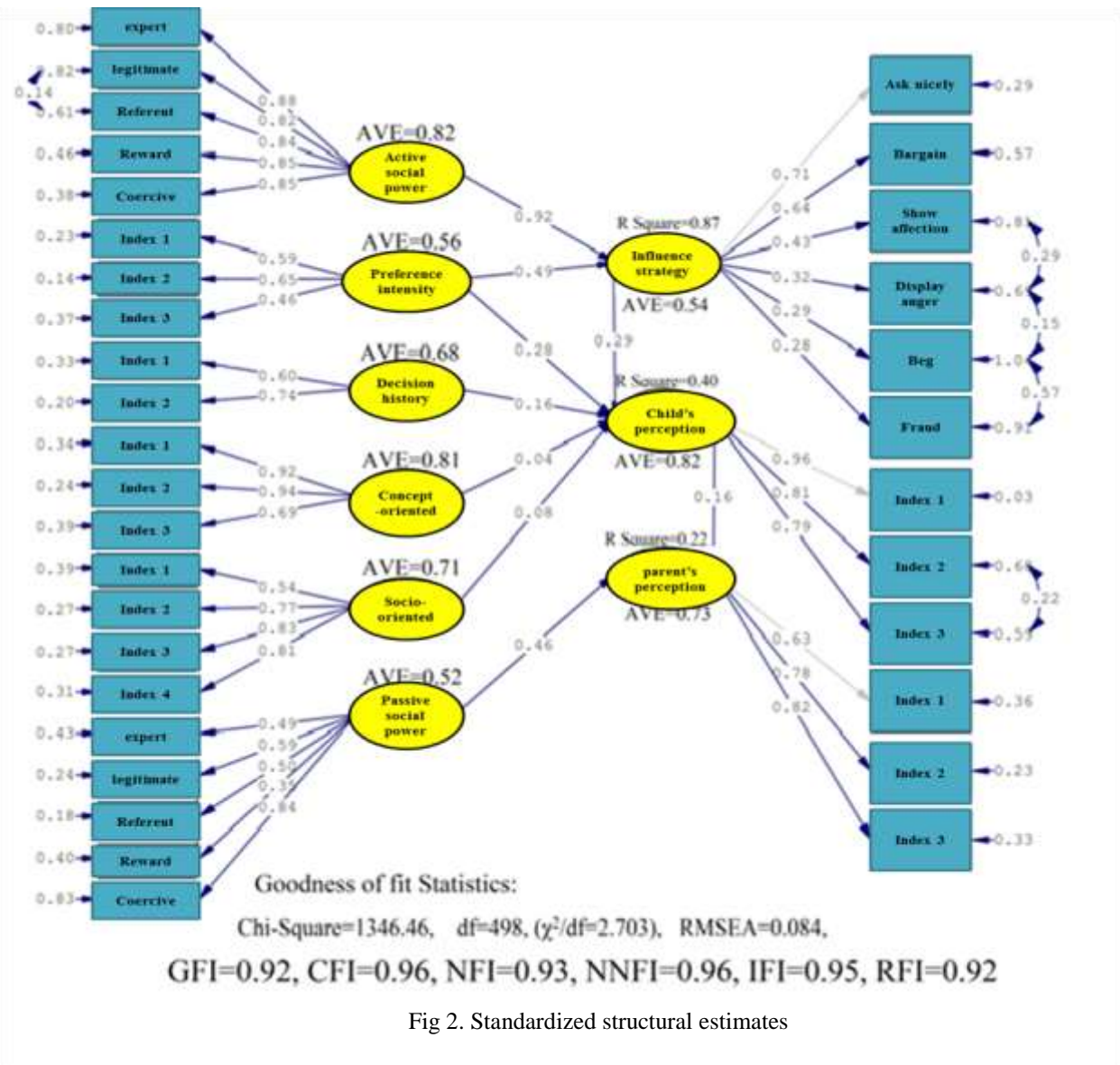


Table 2. Path estimates of the structural model		t-value
Active social power	→ influence attempts	9.21
Preference intensity	→ influence attempts	4.27
Preference intensity	→ children's perception of influence	2.96
Decision history	→ children's perception of influence	1.87
Socio-orientation	→ children's perception of influence	.52
Concept-orientation	→ children's perception of influence	1.22
Passive social power	→ parent's perception of child's influence	7.49
influence attempts	→ children's perception of influence	2.27
parent's perception of child's influence	→ children's perception of influence	2.39



Table 3. Construct validity assessment			
Construct	Factor loading	Construct	Factor loading
Active Social Power		Influence attempts	
Active expert power	8.43	ask nicely	-
Active legitimate power	8.42	Bargain	10.52
Active referent power	2.98	show affection	7.2
Active reward power	3.51	display anger	5.97
Active coercive power	6.18	Beg	4.59
Preference Intensity		Fraud	4.76
Index 1	16.72	Passive social power	
Index 2	19.4	Passive expert power	12.08
Index 3	12.26	Passive legitimate power	16.61
Decision History		Passive referent power	16.58
Index 1	13.88	Passive reward power	9.39
Index 2	16.31	Passive coercive power	9.86
Concept- Oriented		Parent's perception of child's influence	
Index 1	19.2	Index 1	-
Index 2	20.53	Index 2	14.45
Index 3	16.17	Index 3	14.28
Socio- Oriented		Children's perception of influence	
Index 1	13.82	Index 1	-
Index 2	18.88	Index 2	7.6
Index 3	19.55	Index 3	7.65
Index 4	18.85		

Hypothesis 1a, which posited that concept-oriented communication was positively related to children's perception of influence, is not supported ( $p > .05$ ). But hypothesis 1b, which posited that socio-oriented communication was not related to children's perception of influence, is supported ( $p > .05$ ). Hypothesis 2a and b are supported; passive social power is related to parent's perception of child's influence, also active social power is related to influence attempts ( $p < .05$ ). Also hypothesis 3 is accepted; we accepted that children who exert more influence attempts, have more purchase influence than children who exert less influence attempts; and children who use influence attempts will be able to influence on parental purchase decision ( $p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 4a and b are accepted, which means that, children with an intense preference for a particular decision outcome will exert more influence attempts than will children with a less intense preference for a particular outcome; and we agree that, children with more preference intensity for a product or service will perceive themselves to have more influence in purchase decisions than will children with less preference intensity for a product or service.

But decision history had no influence over children's perception of influence. The results of the present study are consistent with the literature. So H5 is rejected ( $p > .05$ ).

Finally, we found that parent's perception of child's influence is related to children's perception of their influence ( $p < .05$ ). We assume that the nature of influence is reciprocal. So we must measure the influence of children's perception of influence on parent's perception of children's influence. To do this, we use Pearson correlation analysis. This result provided support for H6; Perception of influence by children, are related to parent's perception of children's influence ( $p < .01$ ).

Examination of the  $R^2$  estimates also supported the findings. In this study, 40% of the variance in children's perceptions of their own influence and 22% of the variance in the mother's perceptions of their children's influence were explained by the relationships in the conceptual model. In addition, 87% of the variance in influence attempts was explained by a child's active social power and preference intensity.

## Discussion

Based on the research results we found that children apply expert, referent, reward, and coercive bases of active social power to perform influence attempts, either in the positive manner or in the negative manner. They perform these strategies to have greater influence on family purchase decision-making. This means that, over the time, children learn that they can influence on family purchase decision in various ways such as demonstrating their knowledge and expertise about the product, giving information about the product, showing affection towards parents, and selecting items that parents would approve. Children also learned that they can employ negative methods in order to affect parents' decisions, methods such as misbehavior. Finally children perceive themselves to have legitimate power. Nowadays children's information has increased over the past, due to increasing mass media, and relationship with peers. So children feel that, they have "rights" in decision-making. Thus we can say that children use all of their social power.

We assume that children have passive social power apart from the active social power. Parents felt that their children use legitimate and coercive powers more than other powers. This means that parents perceived their children to be influential by using positive and negative ways. Parents valorize legitimate right for children to participate in the decision-making process, this is due to the parent's excessive perception of children's coercive power. Parent, in order not to admit that their decision-making are affected by their children, did not attribute passive referent, reward, or expert power to their children. Parents may feel that if they were to recognize their children as having reward and expert powers, they would then have to admit to being susceptible to manipulation by their children.

This research was also able to show that children were skilled in appraising their social power bases and match their power resources with proper influence attempts to gain the maximal return. This means that, in each situation, children use different combination of power resources and influence attempts in order to have more influence on family purchase decision.

Another important variable that measure children's perception of influence was preference intensity. We found that a child's preference of purchase decision has meaningful effect on children choice of influence attempts. This means that children employed influence attempts in a best way when they strongly desire to purchase a particular item. In addition, child's intensity of purchase decision can explain child's assessment of his/her influence. This means that children with intense preferences for a product are more likely to regard themselves powerful in the decision-making process.

Differences between child's perception of active social power and his/her mother's passive perceptions of his/her social power, is an interesting phenomenon clear in this study. Nevertheless, both active and passive social power will help children independently to increase their influence on family purchase decision. So, dividing the child's social power into active and passive resources appears to be a fruitful approach.

In this study, we found no relationship between concept-oriented communication and children's influence. So our hypothesis is rejected. To find the reasons, we took an interview with some parents in this topic and found that Iranian parents believe school children are too young to understand adult rules. So Parents are less likely to allow school children to participate in the purchase decision-making than older children. Thus, when a child is not old enough to understand parent's expectations, do Iranian mothers engage in high levels of socio-oriented communication. So, Iranian mothers behave in socially oriented with school-age children. This is the reason why in this age group, concept-orientation pattern had no effect on children influence. Another dimension of family communication pattern is socio-oriented. We found that socio-oriented communication had no effect on children's influence. Since socio-oriented communication environment limit children's influence in family consumption decisions, because such families emphasize harmony and children in these families are expected to go along with parent's decisions. High levels of socio-oriented communication may be considered beneficial and useful in dependence-oriented, collectivist nations and overly intrusive in individualistic nations. Messages targeted at dependent, collectivist nations could stress the importance of the mother in socializing the child, with messages such as "only a mother knows what's best for her children." (Rose et al, 2002). These finding have implication for the marketing strategy. The characteristics that make up the two categories of parents can be used for market segmentation purposes.

According to the results, decision history had no effect on children's influence. As explained above, Iranian mothers behave in socially oriented with school-age children, and are less likely to allow school them to participate in the purchase decision-making. Indeed, most decisions are made by parents. Hence, less participate in the decision making, less perception of successfully in decision making. So, decision history had no effect on Iranian children's influence.

Finally, the interdependent or reciprocal nature of child-parent influence judgments was demonstrated. This finding supports the notion that influence is a reciprocal phenomenon, whereby children's assessments of their influence are related to the parents' assessments of children's influence and vice versa.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Conceptually, the model examines only static relationships between children's choice of influence attempts and their influence over the decision outcomes, not more dynamic parent-child interactions or the give-and-take that commonly occurs during family decision making. Additional research that explores these aspects of interactions might yield additional insights into the relationship between children's choice of influence attempts and their relative influence on family consumption decisions.

The data collection limited the sample to only one parent and one child per dyad. Further research might include both parents as well as siblings in the study, if conditions allow. Other areas to consider in the future would be the investigation of these hypotheses in a wider age range of children. Furthermore, the sample population consists of parent and children in 2 schools in north and center of Shiraz, Iran. Because of the limited sample, additional research could test the validity of the proposed model using a more diverse set of respondents.

The children that participated in the field research had a mean age of 9.8, which might imply that at times respondents may have been somewhat young to understand precisely the questions asked. So, future research is recommended to involve adolescent who possess higher level of cognitive ability. Since all questionnaires were completed, it might signify that respondents felt obligated to cooperate and might have led to inaccurate responses in some cases.

Finally, an interesting area to explore in future research would be the interaction of the cost of the product with the type of product (child versus family) on children's influence.

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