

INFORMATION SOURCES FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS ATHLETIC SHOE PURCHASING

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the size and characteristics of the market, college students are one of the most important markets for many companies (Wong & Smith, 2002; White, 2001; Miller, 1998). White (2001) stated that the college market is a critical segment for marketers to reach and listen to because college students are faced with a whole range of life decisions, including many first-time purchase decisions without input from parents. Additionally, it is an important time for marketers to connect with this demographic group, reaching them as they establish life-long buying patterns and loyalties.

In 2003, there were approximately 15.6 million students attended colleges and it is predicted that there will be 17.7 million college students in 2010 (Morrison, 2004). As the number of students increase so does their consumption. The direct buying power of college students was estimated to be over \$200 billion in 2004 with the average discretionary income of \$3,444 per year, and it is projected that college students' spending will surpass \$230 billion by the end of 2010. Moreover, aside from its direct buying power, the college market influences an additional \$300 billion to \$500 billion each year (2004, Morrison; Wong & Smith, 2002).

Athletic shoes are popular products for college students. According to SGMA International (2003), consumers in the U.S. purchased 428 million pairs of athletic footwear and spent approximately \$15.7 billion in 2002. People ages 18 to 24 spent over \$1.9 billion that was approximately 13% of total athletic shoe market in 2002. On average, college students spent \$52 to buy a pair of athletic shoes, which was considerably higher than any other age group.

In order to reach the college student market, one of the most essential aspects for marketers to understand is factors that influence college students' purchasing decisions. Kotler and Armstrong (2001) stated that among the consumer decision making process, understanding consumers' sources of information for the product is crucial because it is the early phase of consumer behavior and it may influence the rest of the consumer decision making process.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the college students' information sources for purchasing athletic shoes and to examine if information sources influence differed between demographic segments. Developing knowledge about information sources for college students' purchasing athletic shoes will help consumer educators, companies, and marketers to understand their consumption behavior.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

In the past decade, the field of marketing, including consumer behavior has received great attention (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996; Light 1994). Researchers found that when consumers seek information about certain products, they relied on some key sources, which transmitted consumer-related values, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors (Mangleburg, Grewal, & Bristol, 1997; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993; Shim, 1996). The information sources "can be any people, organizations or reference groups directly or indirectly involved in socialization because of frequency of contact with the individual and control over rewards and punishments given to the individual" (Moschis, 1987, p. 14). These sources are very important to the consumers and continue to influence the development of the individual's character. Many studies have found that among the different information sources, family, peers, mass media advertising, and salespeople were the most important information sources (Keillor, Parker, & Schaefer, 1996; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993; Shim, 1996).

The information sources were directly affected by certain variables (Mangleburg et al., 1997; Moschis & Mitchell, 1986; Shim, 1996). These variables can differ from individual to individual, such as occupation, education, income, race, religion, gender, and living area (Moschis, 1987). The following section will review how information sources influence on purchase decision.

FAMILY

Family, especially parents, played an important role when people (young people in particular) seek information for certain product (Shim, 1996; Shim & Koh, 1996). Consumers learned the basic knowledge of consumer behaviors by interacting with parents. Mascarenhas and Higby (1993) stated that parents influenced young consumers by letting them observe and imitate their consuming behaviors, by interacting with them in their consumption, and by providing them with opportunities for guided consumption. Moschis and Churchill (1987) also found that the greater the communication between college students and their parents about consuming behaviors, the more economically prudent their consumer choices were. Although some studies reported parental influence was found to decrease when consumers get older, studies found that parental influences were still important on college students' purchasing behavior (Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993).

PEERS

Like family, peers may directly affect college students' consuming behavior (Lachance, Beaudoin & Robitaille, 2003). Studies found a strong correlation between young consumers' product purchase behavior and peer influence (Mangleburg et al., 1997; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993; Moschis, 1987; Moschis & Churchill, 1987). The frequency of communication with peers was found to correlate with various consumer-related behaviors such as brand awareness and product preference (Keillor et al., 1996; Moschis & Churchill 1987). According to Feltham (1998), family influences (especially parental influence) decreased while friends' (including roommates) influences significantly increased on college students' brand choice behavior. There was also a positive relationship found between the time spent at the university and the peer influence on brand purchasing decisions (Feltham, 1998).

MASS MEDIA ADVERTISING

Because many consumer behavior studies have focused on issues surrounding the effects of advertising on people, mass media advertising (television in particular) has received the highest attention among consumer information sources (Gorn, 1985; Hite & Hite 1995). The primary role of advertising is influence the consumer purchase decision by enhancing brand awareness and beliefs. Advertising can influence consumer purchase decision a number of ways as a source of product information, creating awareness of the brand, and increasing the probability that that brand is evoked in the consumer's mind just by mentioning the product itself (Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995). Through mass media, nationally advertised brands become highly familiar to consumers, reinforcing choices of familiar brands. Exposure to advertising affects consumers' product and brand awareness, purchase requests, and product choices.

SALESPEOPLE

Salespeople, and store personnel in general, can affect particular consumer behaviors (Moschis, 1987). By interacting with retailers, a person can receive an orientation to consumption in the form of information about new situations and products. Often, salespeople are the primary source of communication for some consumers and thusly can affect consumer behavior and satisfaction (Oliver & Swan, 1989; Wilkie & Dickson, 1985). By helping a consumer obtain product information and providing guidelines about what should be expected during the acquisition process and use of a product, a salesperson may influence consumer expectations concerning the product (Grewal & Shama, 1991). According to Feltham (1998), with approximately 40% of the consumers in this study indicating a preference for salespeople as a source of information and advice, salespeople were considered a more reliable information source than the mass media and, second in importance to parents and more important than peers as an information source.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What is the most frequently mentioned information source by college students for athletic shoes purchases?
2. Do information sources differ between female and male students?
3. Do information sources differ for students with different income sources?

METHODS

A total of 418 college students (n=418) at a large NCAA Division I-A university in the southeastern United States participated in this study. There were slightly more female respondents (220; 52%) than male (198; 48%). In respect to main income sources, 218 (52.2%) students stated that their income source was parents, scholarship/grants were

selected by 18 (4.3%), 138 (33%) stated jobs, 20 (4.8%) loans, and 24 (5.7%) stated other than above income source (see Table 1).

The instrument developed for this study was a survey based on information sources and consumer socialization from a study by Mascarenhas and Higby (1993). This tool measured factors similar to the ones in this study, provided the material for each section of the survey. Some of the survey questions were revised to make them more appropriate for this study or more suitable for the population tested in this study. These revisions were minor and had no apparent affect on the face validity of the questions. The survey instrument was pilot-tested with 57 college students. Test-retest and the Cronbach alpha coefficient of .82 supported the instrument's reliability.

The instrument for this study contained 31 questions. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic data: participant's gender and main income sources (i.e., parents, scholarship, job, loan, and other sources). The answers to the questions provided individual background information for each participant. The demographic data questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather demographic information to investigate the influence of socialization agents according to different demographic backgrounds. The second part consisted of questions about the information sources to the population. For this section, a five point Likert-type scale (5-strongly agree; 4-agree; 3-neutral; 2-disagree; and 1-strongly disagree) was used to rate the agreement of each factor. The conceptual framework, review of literature, and pilot study identified the four factors of influence (family, peers, mass media, and salespeople) that were explained previously.

Descriptive analysis of frequency count and percentage were used to investigate major information sources. Chi-square analyses were applied to test significant difference between the participants' demographic status and information sources on athletic shoe purchasing. For the statistical significant test, the alpha level (α) was set at .05.

RESULTS

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Research question one was used to investigate what is the most frequently mentioned information source by college students for athletic shoes purchases. Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentage revealed that 156 (37.3%) students stated that peers were the greatest information sources followed by salespeople (125; 29.9%), mass media (102; 24.4%), and family (35; 8.4%).

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

Research question two was used to investigate whether information sources differed between female and male students in their athletic shoe purchases. A chi-square analysis revealed that information sources did not significantly differ between female and male students on athletic shoe purchases ($\chi^2(3, N=418)=5.705, p=.127$).

Both female and male students stated that peers were the greatest information source for athletic shoes purchases followed by salespeople, mass media, and family. For the female students, 82 (37.3%) students stated peers, 62 (28.2%) stated salespeople, 51 (23.2%) stated mass media, and 25 (11.4%) stated family were the greatest information source for athletic shoes purchases. For the male students, 74 (37.4%) stated peers, 63 (31.8%) stated salespeople, 51 (25.8%) stated that mass media, and only 10 (5.1%) stated that family were the greatest information source for athletic shoes purchases.

RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

Research question three was to investigate whether information sources differed according to students' main income sources. A chi-square analysis revealed that the information sources did not significantly differ according to students' main income sources for college students' athletic shoe purchases ($\chi^2(12, N=418)=15.357, p=.222$).

Students whose main income sources were parents, job, and loan stated that peers were the greatest information sources followed by salespeople, mass media, and family. Students whose main income sources were scholarship/grants stated that mass media were the greatest information sources on their athletic shoe purchases followed by peers, salespeople, and family.

Students whose main income sources were other than parents scholarships/grants, jobs, and loans stated that salespeople were the greatest information sources followed by peers, mass media, and family. Although frequency

and percentage of information sources slightly differed according to students' main income sources, these differences were too small to have statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that overall, peers were the most frequently mentioned information source for college students' athletic shoe purchases. This finding is consistent with previous studies. When people, especially college students, are independent from their family, family influences (especially parental influence) significantly decreased while friends influences significantly increased as a source of information (Feltham, 1998; McNeal, 1991; Moschis, et al., 1987).

Because athletic shoes are a product with potential social significance to college students (use of a particular brand of shoes may be considered to affect their image), and they want to have the same image as their peers, college students are more likely to turn to peer groups than to parents for athletic shoe information (Heath & Scott, 1998). Consumers may decide not to buy a product if they feel that the product is not consistent with their own perceptions of themselves as members of a particular society. People also tend to like others whom they perceive as being more similar to themselves than those who are less similar. Athletic shoes are a product closely related to current fashion trends. Therefore, college students are influenced by agents with similar attitudes, thoughts, feelings, values, and interests in regard to certain products (Austin, 1993).

Today, there are also a greater variety of brands and types of athletic shoes than in the past. Consequently, people seek more accurate and knowledgeable information about athletic shoes from information sources. Because most college students usually wear athletic shoes more frequently than their parents, college students have more experience with athletic shoe brands than their parents. Therefore, it is common for peers to exert greater influence on college students' athletic shoe purchases.

This study used gender and income sources to investigate if information sources differed between different demographic backgrounds. Many previous studies revealed that information sources' influence on purchasing significantly differed according to an individual's environmental factors, such as gender, income, etc. (Mangleburg, Grewal, & Bristol, 1997; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993; Shim, 1996). However, the findings of this study were inconsistent with previous studies. This study found that the information sources did not significantly differ between genders and income sources for athletic shoe purchases. One possible explanation is that athletic shoes are not gender-related products; they are considered more general and necessary products. Gender differences are dependent on particular circumstances. In this study, college students considered their roles and identities as members of a particular society more important than sex roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study, the following future investigations are recommended:

1. For this study samples were drawn only from a 4-year coed college. It is recommended for future study that samples from various types of college settings be used, such as 2-year colleges, religious colleges, women's colleges, and military colleges.
2. A longitudinal research design through different stages of human life development should be conducted. For example research on childhood, adolescence, adults, and senior citizens should be conducted. Because socialization is an ongoing process throughout the human life, influence of information sources can differ by stages of human life.
3. Psychographic data should be considered. This study has focused on college students' demographic variables. For future study, it is recommended that college students' psychographic variables should be used. For instance the design, color, or quality of a product can affect people's athletic shoe brand preferences.
4. Different consuming behavior should be considered for future study, such as impulsive consumers, recreational and hedonistic consumers, brand conscious consumers, habitual and brand loyal consumers, and price conscious consumers. The influence of socialization agents can differ according to an individual's different consuming behavior.

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TABLE 1

Participants' Profile

	N	%
Total sample	418	100
Gender		
Female	220	52.6
Male	198	47.4
Income Sources		
Parents	218	52.2
Job	138	33.0
Loan	20	4.8
Scholarship	18	4.3
Others	24	5.7