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TWEEN CONSUMERS : A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TWEEN'S BUYING DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

The communication channel of Social Media is one of the most revolutionary developments of technology. The fact that consumers use Social Media actively to gather information about the products they have to purchase, has already been well established. Consumers have the power to influence other buyers, through reviews on social media, making social media marketing a critical component of the marketing mix of any company.

This paper conducts an exploratory study of the impact of Social Media on the buying decision making process of Tween Consumers, a subset of the Z generation, (Williams, Page, Petrosky & Hernandez, 2009). Tweens are young consumers, in the age of 9-14years, a segment that is fast emerging as extremely attractive to marketers due to its typical characteristics. These highly brand conscious, digital natives are powerful influencers in the family buying decisions and constitute the segment that will be the future market as well as the purchase decision makers of tomorrow. Designing an effective marketing mix and communication strategy for the tweens is a challenge since this target group is full of dichotomies. These impulsive buyers have access to a lot of information online and connect with peers on Social Media, but the final decision makers are still the parents.

For this study, a structured, predesigned questionnaire was administered to 81 tweens in the cities of Mumbai and Delhi via convenience sampling. Based on the findings of the survey, marketers should target both parents and tweens in order to develop effective social marketing and communication strategies.

KEYWORDS : Tweens, social media, buying decisions, consumer behavior ,brand awareness, Gen Z , Gen I

1. INTRODUCTION

What do you call a consumer who wants to buy everything in sight, is not intimidated by price tags, and is less than five feet tall?

A marketer's dream?

No.

You call them Tweens.

~According to an AdRelevance Intelligence Report, taken back in 2000

The idea of undertaking a research on tween consumers started from observing the materialistic and tech savvy tweens, including the researcher's son, who want to check-out everything online and are passionate about buying a variety of products. They are impulsive buyers and want instant gratification.

The concept of tweens was started by and for marketers and thus took economic significance. The unique characteristics of this generation have been used as an effective tool for segmentation, targeting and positioning

of their products and services by many successful marketers. This segment of the tween consumers has tremendous potential due to their huge buying power and a constant need for retail experience and retail therapy. Therefore, not only are specific marketing strategies being made targeting tweens but products are being designed and created to lure the tween consumers.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Definition of 'Tween'

'Tween' is a relatively recent term, first used in 1987 in an article in the magazine *Marketing and Media Decisions*, that blends two words 'between' and 'teen' and describes children that are 'between' childhood and teenage. It refers to pre-teens or pre-adolescence. In this article the term referred to tweens as a market formed by a young middle tier between the ages of 9 and 15, possessing "its own distinct characteristics and capabilities" (Hall, 1987, p.56, Cook, Kaiser, 2003).

During literature review for this study, it was realized that the exact age definitions of tweens vary from researcher to researcher and different articles and journals have used slightly varying ages. In research conducted by Faris C (2009), "age ranges varied from 10 to 12, 8 to 12, 8-14. For all the variety, any consistency among marketers seems to be 8-14" (p.43). For the purpose of this study, the tweens age bracket was taken as 9 years to 14 years.

Tween is not a developmental or chronological stage but a social and cultural categorization. It is an awkward transitional phase of life, characterized by socio-psychological ambiguities, especially among girls, regarding maturity, both mental and physical (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Walkerdine, 2007). Tweens have also been described as "Young people in that all-too-confusing age between their childhood and teen years." (Faris, 2009, p. 44).

2.2. Characteristics of Tweens

'Tweens' is described as a transitional phase because the characteristics of this segment are a mix of those of children and teenagers. These are preadolescent children who want to be teens but still act like kids. Teens and Tweens are similar yet very different - While some characteristics and trends hold true for both age segments, most do not, and thus they should be treated as distinct marketing audiences. In regards to tweens, Cherrington (2014) states, "it quickly becomes apparent that they do not identify themselves as children and that their developmental needs are fundamentally different" (p. 26). This fact leads to a number of dichotomies in the behavior of the tweens.

This age is marked by a lot of physical development and therefore tweens undergo emotional development and challenges. As a result, they look at "being the same" and "being accepted". Peer group dynamics and peer pressure play a critical role in shaping up the tweens psychology and their behavior. Confirming to the peer group is imperative for acceptance and rejection by the peer group. This will in turn affect the tweens self-esteem and level of confidence. A paradox is that tweens want to be different and stand out from the crowd, but they also want to win the approval of their friends.

Tweens are tech obsessed, feisty, opinionated and love to push the boundaries, but at the same time are very vulnerable during this phase of life.

Tweens are a retailer's delight since they are impulsive buyers as well as compulsive buyers, wanting to satisfy their retail wants immediately. They do not differentiate between needs and wants. To compound this fact, tweens are cash-rich!! Research suggests that tweens get a lot of money from parents in the form of pocket money or monthly allowances and as gifts from grandparents. With dual income nuclear families being the norm, parents indulge the children with expensive gifts and fat allowances, in order to reduce their own guilt of spending less time with them. These cash-rich tweens like to save their money for big ticket purchases, especially technological products that help them remain connected with their peers and friends. They also like to splurge the allowances on products that may otherwise not be allowed to be bought. According to C&R Research Inc.'s 'YouthBeat Syndicated Report, Fall Wave 1' study done in June 2008, annually, this

demographic spends about \$1,442 each, or about \$28.4 billion total, of their own cash. Factor in the purchasing power that their parents spend on them, and this figure jumps to at least \$260 billion a year.

Another dichotomy is that even though most mothers are working in these single child homes, helicopter parenting has become the norm and parents want to keep a close rein, while the tweens strive for more independence.

2.3. Relationship with Social Media

Tweens are also referred to as the Generation I (as in Internet) or Generation V (as in Virtual), since they are the first demographic that takes the online world completely for granted. After all, the Internet has always been there for them. For these Digital Natives the internet is a major and routine part of their lives. Tweens are tech savvy and want to be entertained online. When tweens are online, 70% are gaming.

Tweens see computers and technology as extensions of themselves, says Kelly Thompson, Associate Director, Strategy & Insights, Space150. "It's often a situation where the 12-year-old is the tech support person in the family. Technology is really a second language." As a result, they are usually given online chores like get directions, plan vacations, sharing pictures and emails online, checking out product options and compare prices.

Tween consumers today interact with brands, television media and friends as their main agents of socialization. Unlike previous generations who believed in concentrating on one thing at a time, tweens love to multitask, juggling between cell phones, TV, the Internet and music. They surf the internet while watching TV and even eat while playing online video games!

According to a December 2007 study by the Nielsen Company, tweens don't spend as much time online as their older siblings. 48% spend less than one hour per day online, compared to 81% of teens.

"We see migration to usage of social networks sites at about ages 11 and 12," says Jacqueline Lane, VP, TeenEyes Division, C&R Research. "Overall, tweens who are on [these sites] are not really that engaged in it. And, for the most part, they end up on these sites because of older siblings -- wanting to be like a brother or sister."

Tweens are usually updated with the latest product offerings via Social Media and stay connected with various social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat. Another paradox results due to this characteristic of the tween consumers – Even though tweens are easily influenced as they are still kids, more tech savvy consumers' means they are harder to impress, making the marketers work even more challenging. This paper seeks to examine how the consumer socialization sources can influence the tweens preference for brands or products.

2.4. Brand Awareness

Tweens, especially girls, are fashion conscious and begin to establish their own sense of style, primarily influenced by social media and the Internet. They are interested in the trends and look at various social media elements to keep track of the latest. Tweens are hyper brand conscious since they feel the brands image will help them 'get accepted' by the peers. For tweens, symbolic benefits of a brand are huge, thus, they build close relationships with brands, identify with them personally, follow them online and are highly brand loyal. Brand loyalty and brand attitude in turn influences consumer behavior. Brand awareness, recall and recognition are very high in tweens leading to strong brand associations.

2.5. Consumer Behavior and Buying Decision making process

Five steps or stages are involved in consumer decision making process are :

Stage 1 - Need Recognition – When a consumer becomes aware of a need/ want/problem that can be satisfied by buying a product or service.

Stage 2 - Pre-purchase Information Search involves gathering information to satisfy the need already recognized. The extent of information search depends on the current information level and the perceived value of the additional information.

Stage 3 - Evaluation of alternatives consists of evaluating the various criteria for choosing a product over the other. This evaluation depends on many factors like Product attributes, Brand image, Price and Convenience.

Stage 4 - Actual Purchase is the stage where the final decision to buy or not is made. A consumer may decide not to buy the product for various reasons.

Stage 5 - Post purchase evaluation - After the purchase is made, the customer will evaluate product characteristics and tend to justify the purchase decision. At this point, the retailer has to ensure the consumer feels he made the right decision. Positive post purchase behaviour can result in repeat purchases and word of mouth publicity, if handled well. For social media users, this could translate into sharing their opinion and/or experiences by writing on social media.



Figure 1.1 : Consumer Buying Decision Making Process

Factors that influence the decision to buy include Cultural factors, Social factors, Psychological factors, Personal factors and Family as a unit of consumption. Family members play different roles in the decision making process – decision maker, influencer, gatekeeper.

Tweens have a profound influence on the household spending. Not only do they influence the choice of brands and price points but also demand a number of product categories specifically for their own consumption which may otherwise not be consumed by the family at all. Though tweens heavily influence the family decision making and play the role of ‘influencers’ and/or ‘gatekeepers’, but the parents are still the final decision makers.

Various factors that influence purchase decision making process of tweens are peers, social media, friends, parents. Via this study, the researcher wants to understand which of these determinants has the maximum impact.

2.6. Significance of the Tween Consumer Segment

The main reason for targeting the Indian tween consumers for this research is that they constitute a slice of children’s segment with tremendous potential in terms of market size and its buying power.

One look at the population pyramid of India shows the evident ‘Youth Bulge’. India has the world’s largest tween population (though many are below poverty line). 27.7% of India’s population is in the age group of 0-14 years, reflecting the sheer size of this market segment.

The volume of market share of kids’ apparel is 25% valued at Rs 58,000 crore. To this add the other vast range of products the tweens use (personal care, cosmetics, accessories, and gadgets, entertainment products, like video games, music, movies or books) and the humongous potential of the tween sector becomes evident. To top up, they influence more spending in family buying decisions.

Additionally, tweens are a more powerful generation than past generations since they are a triple opportunity to marketers--"a primary market, an influencing market and a future market" (Norgaard, Bruns, Christensen & Mikkelsen 2007, 197). Marketers who can capture the attention of these young customers can inspire lifelong customer loyalty if they play it right. Thus it is imperative to study the characteristics, values, attitudes and lifestyle (VALS) of the "tween" segment to understand how these values influence purchasing decisions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Target Group: Tweens in the age bracket of 9-14 years, consisting of respondents from both genders and belonging to upper middle class (SEC A1, A2, B1) and middle class (SEC B2, C). The respondents were screened for age, to ensure they fell into the definition of the tweens' age taken for this study.

Area of Research : Mumbai and Delhi (India)

Research Design : Exploratory

Secondary Data: Collected through books, websites, online journals

Primary Data : Collected through a structured questionnaire

Sample Size : 81

Sampling Technique : Convenience Sampling (Non probability)

Questionnaire Design : The structured questionnaire comprising of 25 questions was administered to 81 respondents via email and web links during December 2016. The questionnaire was structured in a manner that it had four sections (though these were purposefully not demarcated in the questionnaire administered to tween respondents).

These broad sections were :

A – Had questions regarding the demographics, psychographics, interests and lifestyle of the respondents and their families.

B – Explored the product consumption basket, the product wish list and spending patterns of the tweens. The focus on apparel and lifestyle products has been given because tweens primarily buy or influence buying in these product categories.

C – Focused on understanding the level of brand awareness and brand loyalty of this segment of consumers.

D – Finding out details of the level of social media usage and digital technology usage, the various networking sites that they follow and the influence of social media on the Tweens' purchase decision making process.

You can use demographics, geographics and psychographics on the parents of tween children to more accurately target this market, says Harmeling. By looking at the parents' education level, spending patterns we can get an idea of their lifestyle and thus the lifestyle of the tween. Hence questions were added that queried the psychographics of the parents and the lifestyle of the family as a whole.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the study was to explore the impact of social media on the buying decision making process of tween consumers in the cities of Mumbai and Delhi. The study aimed to assess that out of all the factors influencing the purchase decision making process of the tweens, which factor/s has the maximum impact.

The secondary objectives, originating from the primary one, were:

- To gain an in-depth understanding of the psychographics of tween consumers, their buying patterns and preferences.
- To understand how social media is influencing the 5 stage consumer buying decision making process.

The purpose of this study was to get insights to help marketers develop effective and efficient social media marketing strategies focused at the Tween Consumers. It will also help them design communication mix appropriate for this target market.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the respondents was tabulated, analysed and interpreted.

5.1. Biographics of the respondents

Age – This was an important aspect of the research since tweens are in age group of 9-14 years and the development of the child is age specific. Out of the 81 respondents, 25.9% were 12 years old, 19.8% were 13 years of age, 14.8% of 10 years, 13.6% each of 9 and 11 year olds and 12.3% of 14 year olds. The mean age of the survey sample was 12 years.

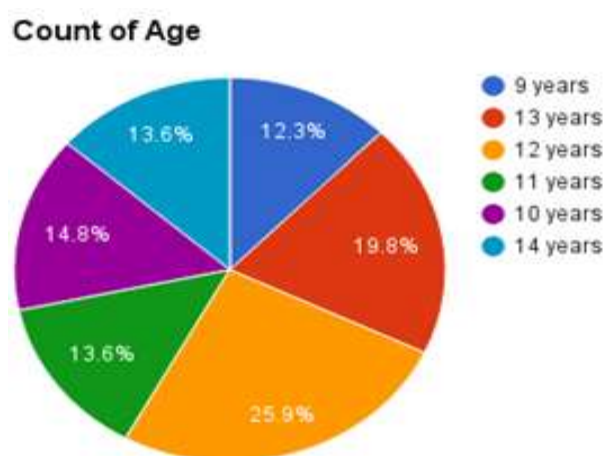


Figure 1.2 : Age Breakup of the Tween Respondents

Gender – 53.1% of the respondent were male and 46.9% female. The gender influences the choice of products and consumption basket as well as the activities that the children pursue.

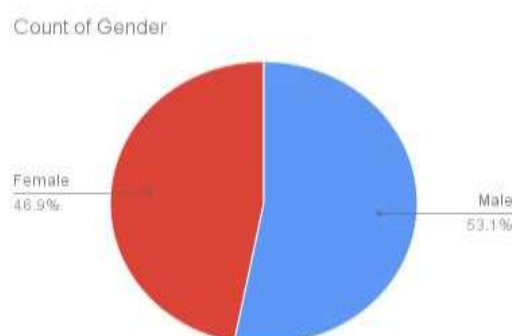


Figure 1.3 : Gender of the Tween Respondents

Siblings : 53% of the tweens are the only child and donot have siblings, only 27.2% had an elder sibling. This information is important to understand the family structure and spending pattern. In dual income nuclear families, since both parents are working, extra household responsibility falls on the tween, thus giving them more independence and probably even more money for household expenses. Moreover, having an elder sibling makes the children more exposed and aware of brands and social media.

Extra-curricular activities : 61.7% respondents play some sort of active sports, followed by music and art.

Favorite pass time activity : 23.5% of the tweens like to listen to music online,21% play video games online, 17.3% watch TV while 6.2% surf social media to keep themselves busy. This data highlights the abundant use of technology/gadgets by tweens and their need to constantly be entertained online.

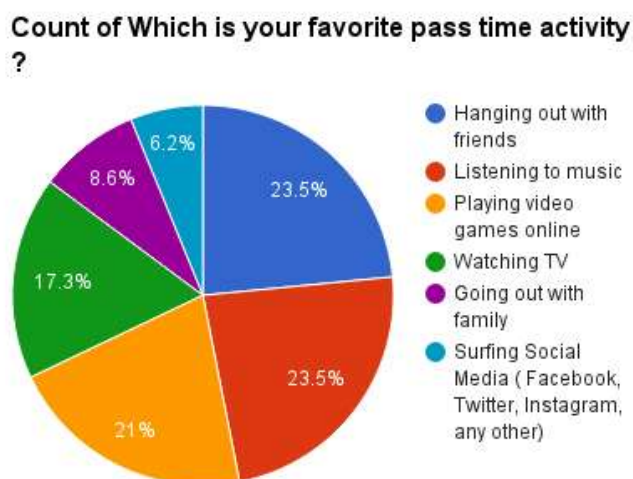


Figure 1.4 : What Tween Respondents do in their free time

Number of vacations : Since we cannot directly ask the tweens regarding the annual income and economic background of their family, this indirect question has been added in the questionnaire to get an idea of the family's social strata the lifestyle they lead. 52% of the tweens' families take a vacation at least twice a year while 11% even thrice a year. 25% of the respondents' families have travelled internationally in the last year, reinforcing the fact that they are mainly from the upper middle class and middle class.

The next set of answers highlights the dichotomies that we have enlisted earlier, especially in the Indian context. Even though the tweens belong to families that are of the higher social strata, 63% tweens do not get any pocket money, suggesting that all the purchasing is being done by the parents. On the other hand, a small segment of 10% get Rs 500 and above per month and 12.3% between Rs 100-200.

5.2. Product consumption basket

50% of the tweens said clothes was the category they purchased the most, followed by 25% buying sports gear (football shoes, tennis racquets, etc) since they pursue sports actively, while 10% of the sample indulge in accessories. This consumption pattern is primarily based on necessity. The researcher added a question wherein the tweens had to give their wish list and say which products they would indulge in if there were no restrictions from parents or budget issues. The obvious answer given by the majority (41%) was gadgets. While only 19.8% chose clothes. This is the consumption basket that is preferred-the wish list. Even though the tweens are fashion conscious and should therefore prefer to indulge in clothes and accessories, these two categories put together are still less than the percent of tweens wanting to indulge in latest gadgets that will enable them to be connected via

social media and indulge in their favorite past time activities of playing video games and listening to music online.

Count of Which products would YOU WANT to buy more often, if there are no restrictions ?

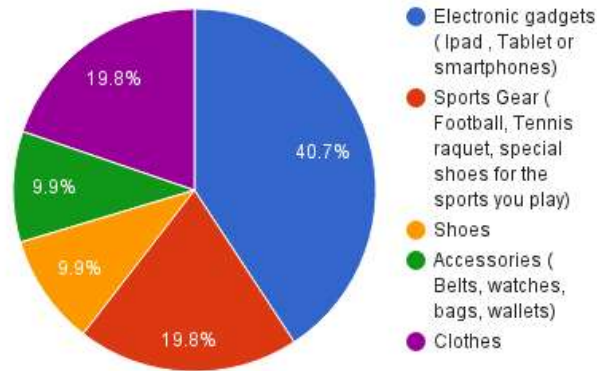


Figure 1.5 : The Tween's Purchase Wish list

5.3. Brand Awareness

53% tween respondents said they always buy branded products and 17% shop online. The tweens could easily list down the usual brands and MBOs they shop from. 70% of the tweens said the parents chose the brands/stores from where to purchase and only 20% are able to decide themselves. This data shows that the tweens are extremely aware of various brands, even those that are available online. Brand choice is crucial for them as it influences acceptance or rejection by peer group.

5.4. Social Media

Browsing Time per week : Even though 53% of the tweens browse social media and social networking sites for less than an hour each week, a huge chunk of 12.3% did so for than 5hours weekly, while 14.8% browsed for 2-5hours.

Count of In a week, how much time do you spend in browsing social media ?

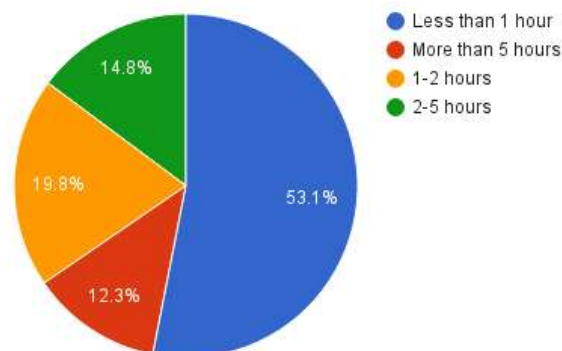


Figure 1.6 : Number of hours per week tweens browse on social media

58% tweens had an account on at least one social networking site. Facebook was the most popular, followed by Instagram and lastly Youtube. To another question, 30% of the tweens responded saying they follow their favorite celebrity, bloggers and youtubers online. This finding was especially interesting - not only are a huge segment of the tweens online but also following their idols online. This is another dimension of the 'constantly being connected' characteristic.

5.5. Purchase Decision Influencers

53% of the respondents check user reviews on social media before purchasing a product. The main aspects they looked at were product features, followed by price comparisons, trends and then brand options available. Surprisingly, promotional offers were the least researched aspect.

In the next question the respondents had to rate how likely were they to be influenced to buy (or not buy) a product based on the user reviews. A 3-point scale was chosen instead of a 5-point Likert Scale so as to not confuse the young respondents. 15% rated it 3, reflecting they would definitely be influenced by the social media reviews. 44.4% were neutral (chose rating 2) and 40.7% felt they would not be influenced.

52% felt they could trust the user reviews even though these 'users' were strangers on social media and not personally know to the tweens. This reinforces the influencing power of social media, of convincing strangers to buy or not buy a product/brand based on the feedback online.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, pre-adolescent children between the ages of 9 and 14, referred to as tweens, were surveyed with regard to their awareness about brands and interaction on the social media and social networking sites.

This study also helped gain an in-depth understanding of the psychographics of tween consumers, their buying patterns and preferences and their purchase decision making process. Several conclusions can be drawn from this research. The findings of this study have significant implications for brands and marketers.

Based on the results of the research, we can conclude that, this sample of tweens, had relatively high awareness on brand names and strong purchase preferences for branded products. Parents and tweens often wear apparels of the same brands and this itself has become a fashion statement. This implies that product designers can plan ranges that appeal to both parents and tweens, thereby encouraging sales. The next implication is that marketers should create even stronger brand associations to further increase brand recall and recognition. Marketers should create advertisements to appeal to the tween market via social media that encourage the tween to further research the product through these channels.

Peer, parental and social media influences, combined with tweens obsession for 'being online', have significantly affected their purchase process. Via this exploratory study, it is apparent that of these 'influencers' social media has the maximum impact. It was also evident that parents have a great effect on tweens' consumer behavior. The recommendation is to adapt this study to focus on the parents of the tweens, to know more about how the parents gain brand knowledge about brands that relate to their tweens.

A major implication is that for tween consumers the marketer has two consumers to appeal to – the child and the parent. The parent has to be enticed to target the tween consumer effectively. Every marketer needs to keep both in mind when planning the marketing strategies, communication mix and visual merchandising.

In light of the above findings, we can adapt the decision making process for the tween consumers in today's context:

Stage 1 - Need Recognition – This stage is hugely influenced by social media – the tweens who constantly browse the internet see the trends being followed in apparel and lifestyle products by various celebrities and want to ape the same, in order to conform and ‘fit in’. This leads to a growth in the number of cases of ‘Need recognition’ or the intent to buy. Need recognition is fast and more often than any of the previous generations.

Stage 2 - Pre-purchase Information Search- The tween consumers, being digital natives, undertake extensive online research in order to find out various aspects of the products that they want to buy and thus gather information in order to persuade the parents to buy them. This implies that the ‘search’ phase is shorter, mostly online.

Stage 3 - Evaluation of alternatives also takes place online using social media. This means the lead time for this stage is considerably shortened.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the learning’s from this research, it is recommended that marketers should engage and connect with tweens via the social media sites for promotions and advertising, which have to be customized to entice the tweens.

The promotion strategies should be interactive to catch the attention of tweens, thus should be in an online game form, a quiz or a contest that can be played online. Receiving free coupons of a gaming zone or a latest sci-fi movie sounds appealing to them.

Since parents in India, still seem to have an upper hand in the decision making, it is a good idea to follow a ‘bundling’ method wherein the add-on appeals to the tween. Devise ways in which the tween consumers share their positive feedback online and get rewarded for it!

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Some limitations were faced for the research undertaken for this paper.

Study Design Limitations - Since this study is exploratory in nature, it is not definitive, though it provides ample insights to base future quantitative research on.

Target group Limitations - The questionnaire had to be designed keeping in mind the fact that respondents are tweens.

- i. Thus the questions had been worded in a simple and easy to understand manner, ensuring the young respondents did not get confused or overwhelmed.
- ii. For the same reason, questions like annual income of family could not be included in questionnaire and a 3 point scale was used instead of a 5 point Likert scale.
- iii. Even though, it was specified that the tween themselves need to answer the questions, the parents’ perspective and influence in the choice of answers could be felt.
- iv. This study could not explore the post purchase behavior as the target group (tweens) is not aware of such complex aspects.

This study has established that even though tweens are not the final decision makers, they greatly influence the choice of product and brand. There is a strong relationship of the tweens with social media which influences their buying patterns and purchase decision making in a big way, but the extent and strength of this relationship could not be established. Future quantitative research can be undertaken to determine the extent and strength of the relationship between the various aspects of social media and how each impacts the tweens buying behavior.

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