

## NUDGE APPLICATIONS IN CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

*A child's thought process is sculptured by the factors that are found typically in the environment; where he/she grows up. Hence the efforts of marketers are directionally focused on creating an environment in order to facilitate the consumer socialization of children. Recently nudge strategies have also attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers because of their potential in influencing the behavior of individuals. By adopting and utilizing review of existing literature, this perusal attempts to analyze the socialization process through facets of behavioral economics, to "nudge" children towards a consumer-specific behavior. The study also intends to facilitate marketers in framing the right strategy, while deciding on the content of their promotions. It facilitates advertisers to have a better understanding of a child's cognitive abilities, the perception of advertisements and their progression as consumers.*

**Keywords:** Nudge, Perception, Consumer Socialization, Advertising, Cognition, Attitude

### INTRODUCTION

Child customers are heavily influenced by the various commercial messages that lure and excite through the various media promotions. Evidently, children are a vital target segment for advertisers around the world. They are thought to be capable of influencing their parent's purchase decisions. Hence promoting to them is viewed as an exceptionally effective approach in order to create a pool of prospective customers. In order to make

an alluring picture in the brains of the children, advertisers wish to secure a lifetime shopping experience in their minds and heart. They are being focused on child consumers with enormous proportions and doses. There are numerous ways that organizations promote to children and contextually television has turned out to be a vital impact in the child's life.

Research based on advertisements have reliably attempted to distinguish and deliver vital issues relating to kids' demeanors

towards television commercials. It is crucial for marketers to recognize whether children understand the intent of advertising. For marketers, the major area of concern is whether children are able to differentiate between advertisements and programs while watching television. Three categories of specific impact of television commercials have been identified by Rossiter (1979), namely: *cognitive effects*, concentrating on child's potential to comprehend promotions, *attitudinal effects*, focusing on children's feelings towards television advertising and *behavioral effects*, uniting on the level to which kids are induced to want and request the brands being promoted.

Interest in the area of consumer socialization of children is growing rapidly among public policy makers, marketers, consumer educators, and researchers. According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2007), consumer socialization can be defined as "the process by which children acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences necessary to function as consumers". The socialization process revolves around, the socialization agent and the type of learning actually operating. A number of studies have concentrated on how youngsters form skills related to consumption. Researchers have also additionally revealed that children primarily respond to advertisements emphatically. For their choice of products, they try to utilize the celebrity/ representative in the endorsement, who appears to satisfy a parental part.

The concept of nudging was first introduced by American authors Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein (2008) in their book "Nudge: improving decisions about health, richness, and happiness". In a general sense, nudging refers to a different aspect of choosing the architecture which alters the behavior of individuals in a prognostic manner, without excluding other options (Thaler, Sunstein, 2008). The nudge theory aims at improving, changing and administrating the process of heuristic influences on the human behavior, which is targeted at changing people. These days, expanding consideration is being paid to nudging as a sort of mediation to make little, recognizable or unnoticeable changes in the environment to make the alternatives more ideal. As indicated by Thaler and Sunstein "it is conceivable to nudge people into a specific behaviour by utilization of the heuristics, emotions, habits and biases we have". Nudging intercessions intend to encourage buyer's choice by altering the environment in which such choices are made. In that capacity, nudging alludes to "any aspect of the choice architecture that adjusts individuals' conduct in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (Marteau, Ogilvie, Roland, Suhrcke, & Kelly, 2011).

### **Theoretical Background**

According to John (1999), there are three stages of consumer socialization in children, classified by their ages. First is the perceptual stage which is related to

three to seven years of age, wherein kids can differentiate advertisements from a program based on perceptual features, holding positive attitudes towards commercials and believe that they are truthful, funny and interesting. The second stage, known as the analytical stage, related to seven to eleven years of age, kids can differentiate commercials from programmes through a persuasive intent,

holding negative attitudes and understand that advertisements may contain bias and deception. In the last stage, the reflective stage, including kid's between eleven to sixteen years of age, kids understand the persuasive intent, tactics, and appeals involved in the advertisement. An illustration of the same has been given in the below figure (Figure 1).

Characteristics	Perceptual stage: 3–7 yrs.	Analytical stage: 7–11 yrs.	Reflective stage: 11–16 yrs.
<b>Knowledge structures:</b>			
Orientation	Concrete	Abstract	Abstract
Focus	Perceptual features	Functional/underlying features	Functional/underlying features
Complexity	Unidimensional/Simple	Two or more dimensions	Multidimensional
Perspective	Egocentric (own perspective)	Contingent ("if-then")	Contingent ("if-then")
<b>Decision-making &amp; influence strategies:</b>			
Orientation	Expedient	Thoughtful	Strategic
Focus	Perceptual & Salient features	Functional/underlying features	Functional/underlying features
Complexity	Single attributes	Relevant features	Relevant features
Adaptivity	Emerging	Two or more attributes	Multiple attributes
Perspective	Egocentric	Expanded repertoire of strategies	Complete repertoire of strategies
		Moderate	Fully developed
		Dual perspectives	Dual perspectives in social context

**Figure 1 – Stages of Consumer Socialization. Source: John (1999)**

*Perceptual Stage:* This stage (ages 3–7) is described by a general introduction towards the prompt and readily noticeable perceptual components of the marketplace. The consumer knowledge of children is portrayed by perceptual elements and refinements, regularly centered on a single element or feature, and meant by real subtle elements from their own perceptions.

*Analytical Stage:* Huge changes happen, both socially and psychologically, as children progress into this stage (ages 7–11). This phase includes the most essential advancements as far as consumer information and aptitudes are concerned. Cognition takes place at a more dynamic level, creating a ground for learning organizations that incorporate statistics regarding unique ideas, e.g. advertiser's

thought processes and also the thought of possibilities.

*Reflective Stage:* This phase (age 11–16 yrs.) is portrayed by further improvement in various proportions of reasoning and societal advancement. Gaining insights into the ideas related the marketplace like branding and pricing turns out to be much more mind-boggling as kids cultivate abilities related to the processing of information and socialization.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine and compare the influence of television commercials and siblings on the child's product-specific consumption preferences
2. To correlate the nudge principles of priming and framing with the consumer socialization process
3. To help marketers modify their strategies in order to create maximum impact in the children's consumption patterns through an understanding of their cognitive abilities.

### **Research Gap**

Over the last few years, research in the area of behavioral economics and nudging has attempted to provide insights into how people actually make decisions based on their judgment of the stimulus they are exposed to. From the consumer socialization perspective, children often acquire social skills by modeling parents, peers, siblings and mass media (Bandura, 2002). These agents of socialization also

create an environment where children learn to behave as consumers (John, 1999). According to Moschis and Churchill (1978) taking a closer look at the relative influence of these agents of socialization will enable policymakers to evaluate commercial stimuli. Although there has been extensive research on the agents of consumer socialization and their relative impact, no previous studies have attempted to apply nudge principles to the process of socialization. This conceptual article aims at addressing that gap by building a hybrid framework encompassing both traditional and nudges tools for the socialization to occur. This paper argues that the two agents of socialization namely television and siblings actually aim at shaping the consumer skills of a child through nudging.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Children as Potential Consumers**

The study by McNeal (1998) featured that children comprise three distinctive consumer markets: "primary, influence and future". Significance of children as an essential target market for items like toys, snacks, garments and so forth, has for quite some time been recognized and tended to by advertisers. Anyway the power and size of this market has now gone up significantly. According to Gram (2007), advertisers of adult product-classes are likewise escalating endeavors to charm children for their part as key influencers and future shoppers. The explorations by Howard and Madrigal (1990) & Gram and

Therkelsen (2003) reveal that children have a strong impact in family decision making and they may initiate the buy, gather data about available alternatives, propose retail outlets, and have a say in the final product choice. Bridges and Briesch (2006), suggest that while devising marketing strategies focusing on children, it is critical to consider whether the product category is one in which children may have impact. As per Beatty and Talpade (1994), the extent and nature of children's impact is dependent on, who uses the product and the apparent significance of the product to the user.

### **Consumer Socialization**

In the words of Ward & Wackman (1972), consumer socialization can be defined as "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning in the market place". The most common socialization agents for children are family, siblings, television, in which parental style and media communication patterns are pivotal in children's purchase behavior. According to McNeal and Yeh (2003), the consumer socialization process of children begins when they start accompanying their parents to various stores for purchases. Children initially make purchase requests for the products they prefer, but as they grow they start visiting the stores and make purchases of their choice. A number of studies have been carried out in order to understand how children develop consumption habits and act as consumers. According to John (1999), children

develop their consumer behavior norms by observing their parents and siblings, who often act as role models and potential sources for consumption related cues. A study by Rummel et al. (2000), shows that children react positively to commercials involving a spokesperson, who fulfills the role of a parent.

### **Agents of Consumer socialization**

In his study John (1999), combined the findings from Piaget's (1970) theory of intellectual development and Selman's (1980) theory of social development and proposed a consumer socialization model where children transform into consumers by passing through a series of developmental processes. In their research Ward et al. (1977) have put the learning theory into practice, in order to elaborate on the concept of consumer socialization and assumed that: understanding of product-related information is a primary element of children's learning of the marketplace. According to McLeod and O'Keefe (1972), agents of socialization are those persuasive sources that express norms, attitudes, motivations, and behavior to the learner. Further research conducted by Ward (1974), has provided with substantial evidence to prove that brands, products, packaging, parents, peers, mass media, and retail outlets are considered to be sources of information and have been identified as agents of socialization. The sources of influence upon the socialization of children are personal and situational factors, namely: attitude towards the product, brand and store experiences,

advice in the marketplace and the buying culture adopted from parents, peers and mass-media (Mascarenhas and Higby, 1993).

### **Television as an Agent of Socialization**

In the words of Moschis (1987), as compared with other agents, mass media has received the most attention, as an agent of consumer socialization. Specifically, television among all forms of media plays the role of a pervasive agent of socialization for children. According to O'Guinn and Shrum (1997), the two primary dimensions of media, namely – advertising and content, are the key influencers and have maximum impact on children. A study by Moschis and Churchill (1978), reveals that in the context of consumer socialization, higher exposure and interaction with mass media leads to increased learning of consumer behavior among children. The research conducted by McNeal and Ji (1999), revealed that on an average, children are exposed to around four hours of television every day, which is considered to be a vital source of information for learning about new products.

### **Distinguishing Advertisements from Television Programs**

Children's ability to distinguish a television program from a commercial is an area that has been subject to a lot of disagreement. In the study of children aged between two to seven years by Rubin (1974) and a perusal of children less than five years of age by Kunkel and Robert's (1991), it was evident that children were incapable of

distinguishing between television advertisements and programmes. On the other hand, a study of children under five years of age by Gaines and Esserman (1981), followed by Petros and Petrella (1982), advocated that children are very much capable of distinguishing between both. These contradicting views can be substantiated by taking into account the relevant age-group under scrutiny and the method of research adopted, namely; verbal, non-verbal or observational. In their respective studies, Preston (2000), Young (1990) and Dorr (1986) argue that five years is the defining moment when children cultivate the ability for the advertisement/programme differentiation by the help of cues. As examined by Goldberg (1990), in a study of four and five-year-olds, it was evident that children were able to point out how an advertisement is different from a programme but could not explain why they were different.

### **Childs Understanding of Advertising Intent**

According to Martin (1997), advertising intent can be defined with regard to the child's comprehension of an advertisement and additionally their understanding of the advertiser's primary motive behind the same. In this regard, children's understanding of the advertising intent is considered to be either assistive/informative or persuasive/selling. In the words of Preston (2000), delivering product related information to the intended target audience is facilitated by the

informative role, whereas the persuasive role denotes the motive of an advertisement aiming at the development of a purchase intention. Blosser and Roberts (1985) are of the view that, advertising intent in a broader scope includes – information, teaching, entertainment, selling, and persuasion. Further study by Lawlor and Prothero (2000), suggests that the schema of the advertiser can be represented by two primary intentions, namely; persuasive and informational.

### **Effects of Advertising on Children**

As the essential goal of promoting is to impact the consumer perceptions about a brand (Romaniuk and Nicholls, 2006) which are ultimately related to the final purchase (Nedungadi 1990; Keller, 2003; Tipps, Berger, and Weinberg 2006), it is normal that many studies in advertising have attempted to think of more effective approaches to persuade buyers (Romaniuk and Nicholls, 2006). As of late, discourses of advertising impacts from the point of view of purchasers have gotten more consideration (Gould and Gupta, 2006). Research concentrating on the conceivable negative effect of advertising on particular groups of consumers, for example, children, has expanded (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006). Not quite the same as the discourses about how advertising can persuade target groups all the more proficiently, the real reasons for the examinations managing conceivable negative impacts of advertising

talk about stricter directions on the content of commercials (Henderson et. al., 2004).

### **Siblings as Agents of Socialization**

Siblings are considered to have a profound impact on the emotional, cognitive and social development of children (Dunn, 2002; Karos et al., 2007; Pike et al., 2005), and for some people, the sibling relationship is their most persevering association. Relationship among siblings is a crucial aspect of children's social universes and is implanted in a progression of pro-social and negative interactions (Karos et al., 2007), with it portrayed as a fluctuating relationship (Edwards et al., 2005; Punch, 2008) that regularly includes both co-operation and strife (Punch, 2008). In accordance with fundamental ways to deal with family life, the nature of parent-child relationship can also affect sibling relations (Minuchin, 1988; Pike et al., 2005), with parental differential treatment (PDT) of kids offering to ascend to sibling contention (Suitor et al., 2008; Tucker et al., 2005).

### **Nudging and its effectiveness**

The effectiveness of nudging in altering the behavior and value structure of individuals is considered to be of high practical significance. The critics of nudging seek an explanation to whether designing choice architecture facilitates sustainable changes in the behavior of individuals (Goodwin, 2012). They claim that considerable behavioral effect prompting long-term sustainable practices requires consumer's acknowledgment of the criticalness to

change ways of life and consequent behavioral modifications. Additionally, in their effort to increase revenues, marketers can neutralize uninformed behavior which as a resultant of nudges. Therefore, these contradicting forces could prompt a framework in which huge investments in the form of public finance can be utilized to nudge behaviors. These nudges can benefit the individuals and the society at large, simultaneously being counteracted by marketing strategies (Wilkinson, 2013).

### **Nudging as a behavioral mediation**

Nudging is derived from concepts developed in the field of behavioral economics, which is the science of behavior choice or “choice architecture” (Desai 2011; Hargreaves Heap 2013). Nudges have been also widely applied in consumer and competition policies, especially when it comes to providing default options in situations with complex information or simplifying complex information for users. In the words of Thaler and Sunstein (2008), there exists an automatic mental system, which they refer to as “mindless choosing”. The nudge tactics are aimed at influencing this aspect of “mindless choosing”. They are of the view that consumers know about the decisions they make and the results in spite of the fact that the choices may not be to their best advantage. Nudging can be viewed as the ‘libertarian paternalism’, development, where “libertarian” alludes to an opportunity of a decision. Whereas, “paternalism”, suggests a methodology where it is authentic to impact the settings

to build one specific decision (Bonell, McKee, Fletcher, Wilkinson, and Haines, 2011; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

### **Nudging and Consumer decision making**

The varied choices made by consumers make are grounded on direct gratification and receiving an immediate favorable outcome which is widely preferred (Ainslie, 2001). Individuals tend to favor delights of a shorter duration and get over the long-term impact of a buying decision. In contrast, they will agree to take a phase of non-pleasantness if the culmination is worthy (Kahneman, 2012). Individual practices are primarily decisions that are taken in a subconscious way and they represent non-reflective repetitive behavior (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). In the words of Wood & Neal, (2007) people acquire habits by those series of actions which have been repeated earlier through gratifying outcomes and the environment acts as a trigger to produce that behavior. According to (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, (2000), as a functional tool habits are aimed at obtaining specific goals and they tend to strengthen over time through repetitive behavior.

### **Developing Conceptual Frameworks utilizing Framing and Priming**

#### **Framing and Consumer Socialization**

Nudging expands on the knowledge that availability of information to individual matters but also the way it is presented is equally crucial. Simplifying information and a proper understanding of its context of

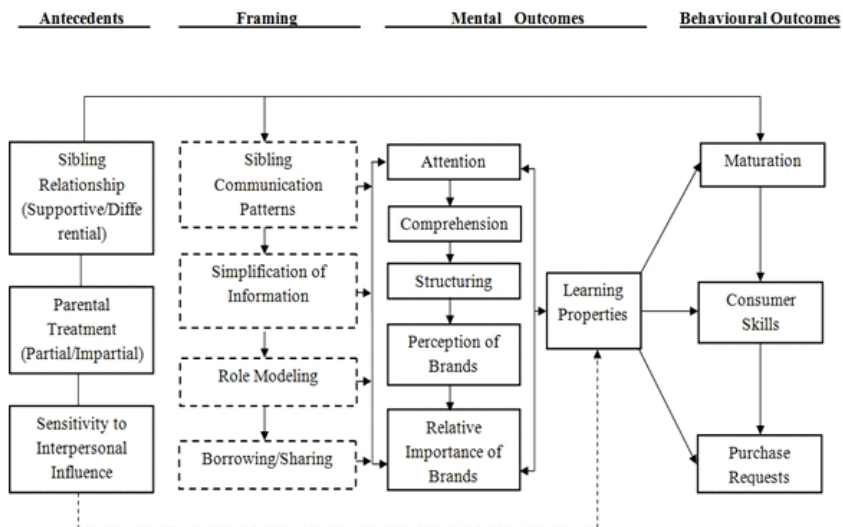


the presentation, often leads a change in an individual's choice of products. According to John et al (2013), nudging is all about providing information and meaningful gestures in order to enable individuals to make positive choices for themselves. The *framing* of an issue is also additionally imperative, it can be explained as the phrasing of information in a manner that essentially facilitates and initiates certain values and attitudes of people. *Framing* basically includes choice and prominence. It involves choosing some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more noteworthy in the context of communication. As explored by Entman (1993), *framing* facilitates the promotion and definition of specific issues, causal understanding, moral assessment and

treatment suggestions for the object being portrayed. A conceptual framework portraying the concept of *framing* is given as below (Figure 2).

As depicted in the above model (Figure 2) primarily comprises of four sections, namely- antecedents, framing, mental outcomes and behavioural outcomes. Section one of the model represents those elements that pre-exist the framing process. The second part of the framework includes the typical roles played by siblings in the passing on and framing the information for their younger brother/sister. They play the role of simplifying the information through regular interactions, further facilitated by sharing of products. The penultimate segment portrays the child's understanding

**Figure 2: A Conceptual Model of Sibling Relationship, Framing and Consumer Socialization of Children.**



Source: Adapted from Daniel B. Wackman & Scott Ward (1976) and Danny N. Bellenger & George P. Moschis (1982).

of the information thereby leading to learning. The child pays attention to the information received based on his/her level of cognitive development. Then the sequence of the structuring of information directionally leads to brand perception. The final phase of the figure denotes the behavioural outcomes of framing in the form of purchase requests by the child.

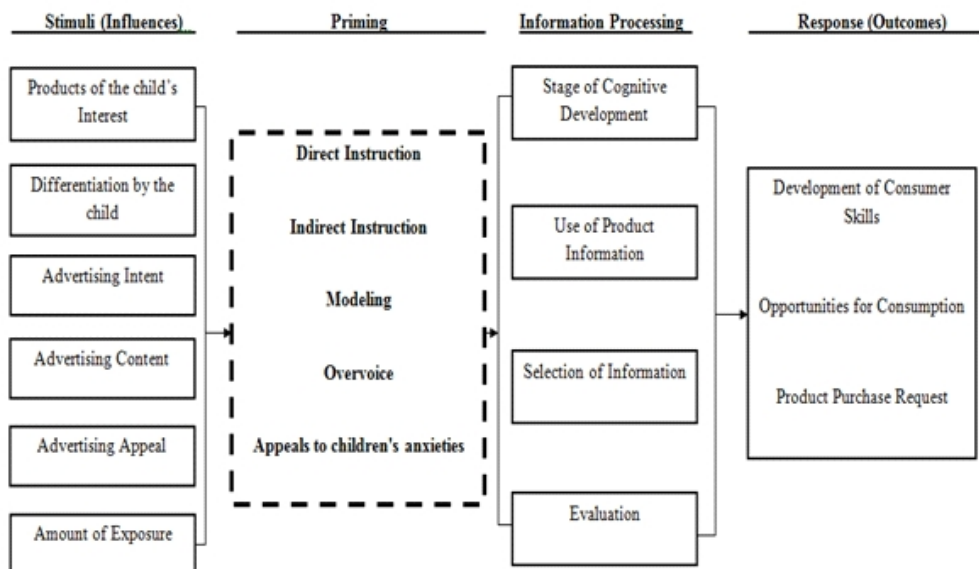
### Consumer Socialization through Priming

Having already discussed on the children's attention and thought to the behavior of their siblings, this framework focuses on the power of *priming*. Research in social sciences has uncovered that individuals can be *primed* into specific behavior by offering straightforward and evidently

irrelevant cues (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). William J. Cusick (2009), in his book, elaborates on the concept of priming. According to him, priming describes a phenomenon wherein a person is subconsciously reacting to a stimulus that is inherently positive/negative. Priming here might be seen as an idea that portrays how external forces influence our emotions, decision and action in a random manner. In the words of David Halpern (2015), priming sometimes is with the intent, such as through the thousands of advertisements we are exposed to.

A conceptual model on priming is depicted below (Figure 3). The framework illustrates the four core phases of stimuli, priming, processing of information and the

**Figure 3: Television Commercials, Priming, and Consumer Socialization.**



Source: Adapted from Scott Ward, Donna M. Klees and Thomas S. Robertson (1987).

outcomes. It is an elaboration of the S-O-R (Stimuli Organism Response) model of consumer behavior. The initial phase of the model represents the various aspects of the stimuli (television advertisements), which include elements like advertising content, the intent of the advertiser, the appeal created through advertisements and the degree of the child's exposure to the medium, often regulated by the parents. A crucial element of this phase being, the ability of the child to differentiate between television programs and adverts.

The second section of the model highlights the priming concept, which includes the following celebrity endorser/commercial content elements: *Direct/Indirect instructions* – where the child viewer is told what to do and what not to. The *Modeling* element approaches the child viewer by depicting good things happening to children because of something they do. *Overvoice*, a cultural way of adding authority to the commercial message, normally by using a male voice, ultimately appealing to the anxieties of the child. The last two sections of the model include the *Information Processing* phase and the *Outcomes* of the same.

### **Limitations and Scope for Future Research**

This conceptual article is not devoid of limitations. The perusal and the conceptual models have been developed using review of existing literature only, research in future can aim at validating the same through empirical evidence. This study has taken

into consideration only two agents of socialization, namely – television and siblings. Future explorations can make an exhaustive comparison of all the other forms of socialization agents in children. The concept of nudging incorporates many other strategies, this paper has utilized only two of them i.e. priming and framing. The other nudges can also be delved into in the future.

### **Implications**

This study raises interesting implications as to how companies would want to design the child consumers experience in order to encourage purchase. If companies could really understand the impact of priming and framing on their child customers, it would encourage introspection regarding their overall customer experience. This paper focuses on the lessons that can be drawn from behavioral economics and the nudge approach in overcoming global marketing challenges which shall help global practices in marketing.

### **Conclusion and Discussions**

This study was designed to have a deeper understanding of the role of television advertisements and the siblings' psychology, leading to the shaping of children psyche as consumers. Designing a schematic plan to nudge the child customer and effectively impacting their consumption preferences requires a thorough understanding of their cognitive abilities. The conceptual models developed in the study shall facilitate a

better understanding of nudging and application of the same in the field of global marketing practices. The effect of parental differential treatment, coupled with the nature of sibling relationships, can act as potential cues for marketers in creating better nudges in the form of their marketing communications.

The conceptual foundations developed in this paper can be of specific significance in the context of current scholarly debates on the relevance of nudging. Apart from that, this study revealed a lacking acquaintance with the idea of nudging and perhaps inadequate significant impressions of these strategies on child consumers. Considering the possible theoretical implications and relevance of this article in imbuing nudge aspects in the area of consumer behavior, it should not be considered as a ground for deciding for or against the implementation of nudges. Rather, this paper argues that the cognitive and behavioral aspects of the child should be considered as a basis for strategy design and implementation. At the same time, the ethical need of involving consumers into the judging of nudge elements requires enhanced information levels and consumer involvement. For the meantime, no direct rationalization can be identified to reject nudging, yet this conclusion cannot be drawn across all purviews of behavior.

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