


Sex-Role Specialization in a Transforming Market: Empirical Evidence from Vietnamese Middle-Class Households

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Abstract

Vietnam is undergoing a rapid transformation to a more prosperous society. This article analyzes household decision making in a transforming economy that has undergone modification of the traditional view of the family, from being an autonomous unit to an object of state policy. This is relevant because policy interventions shape household consumption through gender equality programs and thus have an impact on sex-role specialization. The aim of this study is to advance understanding of Vietnamese household consumption decisions and spouses' current influence patterns by investigating sex-role specialization in Vietnamese middle-class families' decision making. Overall, no significant sex-role changes were observed. It seems that traditional Vietnamese sex-role specialization does not (yet) differ among age groups. Instead, traditional sex-role segmentation remains predominant across all investigated age groups. While economic and consumption habits change rapidly, middle-class families appear to preserve their traditional influence patterns in purchase decisions.

Keywords

household decision making, influence distribution, sex-role specialization, transforming market, Vietnam

Introduction

Trade liberalization, export promotion, abolition of import and export quotas, and tax reductions are only a few among the numerous government efforts to reduce poverty and transform Vietnam into a prosperous society. As one measurable result, gross domestic product (GDP) in Vietnam increased by 6.16 percent in 2010 as compared to 2009 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010; Heo and Doanh 2009).

Economic changes impact consumption levels, and such changes have become more pronounced recently (Le and Jolibert 2001; Shultz 1994). In the past, the Vietnamese spent very little on vacations and leisure activities. Instead, the average Vietnamese household earned just enough to pay for its members' necessities, such as, clothing, housing, and food (Le and Jolibert 2001). Consumer expenditures grew by more than 4 percent during the period from 2000 to 2009; in 2008, Vietnamese spent around 70 percent of their monthly income on consumer goods (e.g., personal care and household products) and services (e.g., personal leisure travel), signaling that consumer spending is an important part of Vietnam's current economy.

In a comparison with Western countries, Vietnamese consumer expenditure as a percentage of GDP is equivalent to North America's (both 68 percent in 2009) and significantly higher than Western Europe's (57 percent), and the World average (58.5 percent; see Table 1 for an overview). Vietnamese spent the most money on cars and motorcycles,

household appliances, and household utensils (including glass- and tableware). Spending on household goods and services increased by 69.1 percent from 2000 to 2007 (Euromonitor International 2008).

Previous research has predominately addressed economic changes in transforming markets, such as China or Vietnam. However, economic indicators and existing measures of consumer behavior are criticized as being of limited validity because change is taking place fast and official income figures are inaccurate due to the enormous shadow economy (Shultz 1994). Little is known about individual purchase decisions at the level of social networks, that is, private households.

Vietnamese households differ from those in the Western world in terms of social and cultural norms (social norms as well as collectivist culture determine dynamics of social networks), spending power, and importance given to consumption of luxury items and their symbolic meaning, signaling consumers' social role, family structure, and the roles of husband and

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Table I. Consumer Expenditures, Possession, and Household Descriptions Vietnam, North America, Western Europe, EU, and World (in Millions US\$)

	Vietnam		North America		Western Europe		EU		World	
	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009
	Consumer expenditures	472.0	445.1	155,542.8	156,285.9	224,851.1	204,550.1	221,755.5	201,434.8	535,565.4
Furniture, furnishings, and floor coverings	2,193.7	2,069.0	63,108.4	62,198.9	92,963.5	83,177.9	91,613.3	81,725.0	344,365.0	325,447.0
Household appliances	540.7	508.3	55,269.6	54,589.0	55,524.2	50,276.9	54,936.6	49,300.4	195,183.2	189,973.5
Glassware, tableware, and household utensils	2,306.4	2,281.4	334,675.8	331,664.2	430,784.2	384,689.7	404,915.7	358,329.7	1,140,911.6	1,093,770.7
Purchase of cars, motorcycles, and other vehicles	266.1	250.0	308,489.4	302,526.8	174,018.6	159,534.6	175,702.3	159,804.8	688,341.0	654,434.2
Audio-visual, photographic, and information processing equipment	29.4	27.9	14,690.4	13,823.0	59,300.8	56,730.6	61,182.8	57,272.2	197,953.2	189,482.8
Package holidays	66.7	68.0	67.1	68.0	56.0	57.0	56.2	57.1	57.3	58.5
Consumer expenditure as percentage of total GDP	1.1	1.1	87.9	88.2	74.3	74.7	73.5	74.2	31.3	31.7
Possession (percentage of households)	10.0	11.0	78.1	80.7	65.9	68.9	65.3	68.4	35.4	37.7
Passenger car	27.3	29.9	99.9	99.9	98.6	98.7	96.9	97.0	66.6	67.3
Personal computer	28.9	30.7	98.3	98.4	90.4	90.7	89.8	90.1	49.7	50.8
Refrigerator	11.4	12.6	84.8	85.6	94.8	95.1	92.9	93.4	62.5	63.5
Vacuum cleaner										
Washing machine										
Description of households										
Number of households	19,479.2	19,811.5	130,031.8	131,437.5	193,301.6	194,590.8	208,825.0	210,472.8	1,781,979.9	1,811,972.3
Average number of children per household on January 1	1.5	1.5	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	1.2	1.2
Occupants per household on January 1	4.4	4.4	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.4	3.8	3.7

Source: Average number of children per household on January 1, Consumer expenditure as % of gross domestic product (GDP): Euromonitor International from national statistics; Consumer expenditure: National statistical offices/OECD/Eurostat/Euromonitor International; Households: National statistical offices/Euromonitor International; Occupants per household on January 1: National statistics/UN/Euromonitor International; Possessions: Euromonitor International from national statistics.

wife. From a sociopolitical perspective, increasing emphasis on gender equality and individual autonomy can be observed. From a marketing perspective, Vietnamese middle-class households are becoming increasingly wealthy, defining a potential consumer market for Western goods. From the perspective of macromarketing, Vietnam, as a country facing political and economic reforms accompanied by social transformations, represents a unique opportunity for studying changing interactions between markets, marketing, and society and consumption habits among households whose members are becoming increasingly wealthy. Moreover, roles of spouses change along with globalization of markets and exchange of information about cultural idiosyncrasies.

This article contributes to existing research in sex-role specialization from a cross-cultural perspective. To this end, it analyzes household decision making in a transforming economy that has undergone a modification of the traditional view of the family from autonomous unit to object of state policy. This is relevant because policy interventions shape household consumption through gender equality programs, labor opportunities, and education and thus have an impact on sex-role specialization.

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to advance understanding of Vietnamese household consumption decisions and spouses' current influence patterns. In particular, it focuses on middle-class families' decision making dynamics in purchases of various goods, on wife and husband influence patterns, and on changes of spouses' influence patterns. It is assumed that influence patterns vary between generations: while older spouses are expected to show traditional influence segmentation depending greatly on the type of product at stake, younger spouses born after the war may already show more equal influence and less sex-role specialization. The charges and restrictions that people have suffered, especially during the war, may have fueled the desire to consume and enjoy life and to adopt a more liberal lifestyle that resembles the Western way of life. Consequently, the younger generation may display purchasing habits and influence patterns that are more similar to those in Western societies than those of the older generation.

Before presenting an empirical study on spouses' influence patterns, designed according to the classical study by Davis and Rigaux (1974), cultural characteristics and decision making in Vietnamese households are reported, followed by a section on husband and wife influence distribution in private households.

Culture and Decision Making in Vietnamese Households

In emerging markets, consumers are considered important, active agents. Consumers exert their agency by "accepting, transforming, or rejecting meanings" (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004, 137). Studies of their choices from among local and foreign offerings are urgently needed (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004) as personal consumption is a stimulant for economic growth (Flurry and Veeck 2009).

In socialist countries, state policy aims at strictly controlling citizen behavior in general (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004), and family consumption behavior in particular (Flurry and Veeck 2009). Policies, such as changing marriage laws or the Chinese one-child policy (Flurry and Veeck 2009), have changed the family structure, marital power dynamics, and the choices families make (Commuri and Gentry 2010; Fowler, Gao, and Carlson 2010).

Vietnam engaged in downsizing reforms, attempted to reduce gender-related gaps in earnings and poverty, and in 2009 launched its seven-point program to be achieved by 2020 among other gender equality measures, such as equal access to employment for women in order to improve their own and their families' standards of living (Rama 2002). In Vietnam, the "consumer revolution" (Shultz 1994, 43), which started more than two decades ago, is still going on, leading to a power shift from the communist government to more consumer autonomy. Consumers are better informed about politics and economics, whether due to internal migration from rural to urban areas and consequent increased dissemination of information, or better access to information about living standards in and outside Vietnam. Consumers can choose liberally among a large number of goods that are offered in an extended retail network. Consequently, marketing interventions, such as advertising and market segmentation, have become more pronounced and consumer segments have developed rapidly (Shultz 1994).

The Vietnamese middle class in urban areas is more affluent than ever (Cohen 2004; General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2008). Current forecasts estimate that an even wealthier consumer market is emerging (Euromonitor International 2010a). An unequal income distribution (Gini coefficient of 37.8) and a persistently high level of poverty (21.5 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty) further describe current Vietnam (Euromonitor International 2010b).

The increased wealth of a growing segment of the population is driving a transformation of family and individual consumption habits. For example, demand for basic household durables is now accompanied by a higher demand for computers, mobile phones, and white goods, which are more expensive (Euromonitor International 2010a). Once wealth is gained, consumers tend to show it by spending money on expensive products, such as luxury goods, cars, furniture, and high-end technology (Cohen 2004; Euromonitor International 2010b; Khanh and Hau 2007). Cultural and social particularities and the relevance of the symbolic meaning of goods need to be taken into consideration when foreign goods are introduced in Vietnam (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004). Expensive clothing and luxury accessories are considered of paramount importance for the Vietnamese as such goods represent social status. In Vietnam, luxury products are not evaluated primarily by their features and attributes, but instead, by the social situation in which they are used (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Khanh and Hau 2007; Le and Jolibert 2001).

There is also considerable exchange within social networks, such as the "corporate family" (cf. Gentry and Mittelstaedt

2010, 27), which has an extended structure due to the collectivist value system and is influenced by the concept of “face” (Tambayah, Mai, and Jung 2009). The high degree of collectivism induces people to behave similarly to others. Therefore, the Vietnamese as a collectivist society have a preference for goods that reflect a specific social image and are proof of the affiliation to a specific group (Li and Su 2007). Long-term family interests are more important than individual interests. When it comes to purchase decisions, the social context needs to be taken into account. The Vietnamese are the first and foremost concerned with achieving harmonious and stable relationships and take less time to decide on products that are for personal use than on products to be used as social symbols (Le and Jolibert 2001). In addition, the culture factor “masculinity” is high in Vietnam, highlighting the importance of male achievement, leadership, and patriarchal attitudes (Khanh and Hau 2007).

In Vietnam and other transitional economies with Confucian traditions, the family was long considered an autonomous unit (Fowler, Gao, and Carlson 2010; Nguyen, Kirk, and Johnson 2009) and not being married was stigmatized. Differences in sex roles in older and younger generations, influenced by political and economic developments including the Vietnam War and economic integration are reflected in cultural values and consumption patterns. One such development pertains to gender equality and dissolving traditional sex roles. With its marriage and family law of 1960, the Vietnamese government put a ban on forced marriage, child betrothal, concubinage, and wife beating. The socialist strategy of industrial development weakened traditional sex roles in the direction of women’s emancipation from their passive household role. Women were asked by the Women’s Union to encourage their husbands to go to war, to take active responsibility for household affairs and assume a greater role in industrial and agricultural production, which led to a greater participation of women in politics, industry, and agriculture.¹ Increasing educational opportunities in postwar times in developing countries, such as Vietnam, were related to bringing women into the labor force and this meant also “bringing the control of women’s labor out of the family and placing it under the control of the state” (Kelly 1990, 138).

After Vietnam’s political reunification in 1975, however, the situation for women changed dramatically because formal occupational quotas were removed and a “defeminization of politics” occurred. Also, occupational segregation along more traditional gender lines occurred because male soldiers returning after the war reclaimed their former jobs (Goodkind 1997). Women returned to low-wage jobs or left the work force, and social inequality remained despite the fact that educational levels of women in the work force had increased. This influenced the sex-role division of labor in the family toward patriarchal structures (Kelly 1990). In addition, a marriage squeeze to the disadvantage of women could be observed after the war. Male mortality during the war of reunification and also men’s emigration in order to escape military service, had consequences on the marriage market in the late 1980s, reducing women’s choices (Goodkind 1997). Moreover, education for girls and

women was not seen as valuable, and illiteracy rates were high (Hieu and Koo 2007).

Vietnam’s development during the late 1980s from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy and economic growth marked a turn in gender equality and related sex roles (Hieu and Koo 2007). Current government strategies to reduce poverty include literacy campaigns and education system reforms (Phan et al. 1994). Changes toward a modern view of the family and a more active family policy have significantly shaped the institution family (Commuri and Gentry 2010; Fowler, Gao, and Carlson 2010).

Today, a new type of consumer is emerging in Vietnam. More than half of all Vietnamese citizens were born after the Vietnam War and are under the age of thirty. Increasing urbanization and westernization, combined with access to modern technology and mass media, have led the population to the desire to “work hard, grow rich” (Ruth and Commuri 1998, 406). Consumers are described as being materialistic, eager to learn new things, and adopt new lifestyles. Family ties are weakening. The generation born after the war is socially and financially more independent than the older generation and buys foreign and domestic products that fulfill the criteria of reasonable price, availability, fashion, preferred lifestyle, and utility (Le and Jolibert 2001). It is undoubtedly this new type of consumer who is “now encouraged to compete” (Shultz 1994, 44).

Influence Distribution in Private Household Decision Making

Given the collectivist nature of Vietnamese society, the socialist political system, and the rapid change in the economy, studying financial decision making in social networks and analyzing sex roles and spousal influence patterns in households is vital to understanding the impact of state policy on the dynamics of markets and the effect of marketing on social networks such as the household (Burgoyne and Kirchler 2008).

Recent market studies in socialist countries focus, for example, on housework (Tam and Chan 2010) and on financial decision making (Liao, Huang, and Yao 2010) and also identify high market potential. Households are sites of cooperation where conflicting interests are frequently negotiated (Burgoyne and Kirchler 2008). However, households are difficult to study because they are intimate and private. Everyday routines and isolated events are not clearly demarcated, but rather are inter-related affairs, depending on and affecting other financial and nonfinancial decisions (Kirchler et al. 2001).

Role specialization in decision making and changes in marital roles were studied in Western countries efficiently and most influentially by Davis and Rigaux (1974) who found substantial gender specialization with regard to product categories and phases of the decision making process. The sex-role paradigm (Belch and Willis 2002; Lackman and Lanasa 1993; Qualls 1987; Tinson and Nancarrow 2005) offers an explanation of gender-role specialization. According to social-role theory (Eagly 1987), women and men take on different social roles that shape stereotypes about gender characteristics. While the

male sex-role stereotype includes self-assertiveness, agency, and motivation to master, the female sex-role stereotype includes characteristics such as being communal, selfless, and caring. From a cross-cultural perspective, societies can be described according to stages of marital power in family decision making. Patriarchy describes a stage in which husbands make decisions autonomously (cf. Ford, LaTour, and Henthorne 1995; Webster 1994; Webster and Reiss 2001). Modified patriarchy allows for more joint decision making, while transitional equalitarianism means that education, occupation, and income determine societal goals and marital power; and finally, equalitarianism shows a high level of shared marital power (Green et al. 1983).

The roles of partners within a household determine who is to be the breadwinner. A distinction is made between single-earner (usually male) and dual-earner families, where both partners contribute to the household. Resource allocation has an impact on roles within households and their choices (Commuri and Gentry 2005). The person making substantial economic contributions to the household, which is also due to education and occupation, is expected to control decision making within a household (following resource theory). However, in contrast to the expectation that this would also apply to women (as chief earners in a household), it was found that women allocate resources differently and downplay their role as a good provider (Commuri and Gentry 2005). While in Western countries, the role of partners has changed due to policy interventions, such as in Sweden (Ekström and Hjort 2010) or Germany (Nill and Shultz 2010), in the current Vietnamese context, males are regarded as families' breadwinners and are expected to work more and ensure financial security for their families. Within private households, husbands are busy with their careers, while their wives care for their houses and children in addition to their own employment. The average annual disposable income earned by males is almost twice as high as females' income (Euromonitor International 2008). These facts suggest a traditional division of roles in partnerships (cf. Kirchler et al. 2001).

Family structures and sex roles have changed since the study by Davis and Rigaux (1974) on private household decision making. More recent research suggests that changing family structures in the Western world point toward more influence of women in all decision areas and dissolution of role specialization (Belch and Willis 2002; Mühlbacher et al. 2009; Qualls 1987). There is general agreement that the difference between women and men in terms of masculinity has diminished, that is, sex differences are eroding because of an increase in the perceived similarity of women's and men's roles. The female position has moved toward more equality and less clear sex segregation (Diekmann and Eagly 2000). Women adopt masculine attributes, such as a higher tendency to take risk or to behave in an agentive way (cf. Auster and Ohm 2000; Twenge 1997), and men have less pressure to behave according to traditional masculine role stereotypes. With respect to partners' influence patterns, the dominance of one partner for specific purchase decisions has decreased (Kirchler et al. 2001).

Several studies conducted in transforming markets, such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore, India, Korea, Latin America, and

Central Africa (Ganesh 1997; Harcar and Spillan 2006; Na, Son, and Marshall 1998, 2003; Yang et al. 2006; Yavas, Babakus, and Delener 1994) provide evidence for changing sex roles outside the Western world and the influence of culture on spousal influence.

In more general terms, changing cultural norms, better education, women's increasing employment and consequently higher income, later and fewer marriages combined with high divorce rates and shifting societal standards have led to changes in attitudes and behavior of wives and husbands in private households (Anderson 1992; Belch and Willis 2002; Flurry and Veeck 2009; Ford, LaTour, and Henthorne 1995; Jianakoplos and Bernasek 2008; Qualls 1987; Reiss and Webster 1997; Sudhanshu et al. 2009). In addition, the number of smaller households and households comprised of unmarried individuals has increased (Reiss and Webster 1997).

The current study investigates whether sex roles are currently changing in Vietnam and whether Vietnamese household purchase decision making processes are changing to resemble those of Western households. The research question is therefore as follows: given the change in sex roles in Western households, a change can also be observed in middle-class households of the collectivist, postwar communist Vietnam due to significant political and economic transformations and social changes. The research focuses on middle-class households as changes are most likely observable in middle-class habits, whereas upper classes are less dependent on country-specific cultural habits, and lower classes tend to uphold tradition for a longer period. It is hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1: Role specialization depends on the product category at stake,

Hypothesis 2: Autonomous versus joint decision making varies across decision making phases, and

Hypothesis 3: Influence patterns are less gender-specific in the younger Vietnamese generation than in the older generation born before the event of the Vietnam War.

Method

Spousal influence patterns were analyzed by focusing jointly on answers of both partners. This offered the opportunity to account for congruence of answers in households and a comprehensive investigation of the couples' purchase decisions. In particular, three phases of decision making (problem recognition, information search, and purchase) were examined for six selected product categories: traditionally female-dominated items, such as cooking utensils and cleaning agents; male-dominated technical items, such as cars and computers; and frequently jointly decided upon expenditures, such as holidays and living room furniture.

Sample

Data were collected from a convenience sample of spouses belonging to middle-class income groups in Hanoi. Traditionally, Hanoi is the intellectual and administrative center of the

Table 2. Sample Description: Education, and Profession (Total $n = 154$)

	Wife ($n = 77$)		Husband ($n = 77$)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Education				
Primary school	7	9.09	5	6.49
Vocational training	3	3.90	5	6.49
High school (no graduation)	17	22.08	12	15.58
High school (graduation)	6	7.79	7	9.09
University degree	44	57.14	48	62.34
Profession				
Housewife	3	3.90	0	0
Employed	47	61.04	49	63.64
Self-employed	17	22.08	20	25.97
Military service	0	0	2	2.60
Retired	10	12.99	6	7.79

country and consumers prefer European lifestyles (e.g., French, English, and Italian) and expensive brands (Cohen 2004). According to Le and Jolibert (2001), family ties are more traditional than in the south of the country. Although the choice of a sample from only one city might limit the generalizability of the findings, an important reason for the sampling approach was that respondents could be motivated to participate in the study, which allows an excellent insight into middle-class consumers in Vietnam.

In total, 154 individuals (seventy-seven couples) participated. The women were between twenty-three and sixty-four years old (mean 38.60, SD 11.41), while the men were between twenty-two and sixty-nine years old (mean 41.51, SD 12.20). To test Hypothesis 3, couples from different age groups were compared: young Vietnamese couples born after the war, middle-aged, and older couples.

The households consisted of two to nine people (mean 3.69, SD 1.34), with an average of 1.19 children (SD .87; between zero and three children) with their parents. The average duration of the relationship of the investigated couples was 14.55 years ($SD = 11.34$), ranging between one and forty years. On average, each spouse contributed equally (50 percent) to the overall household income. About a third (35.06 percent) of the couples earned more than 6 million Vietnamese Dong (VND; approximately 300 US\$) monthly, 29.87 earned between 4 million (approximately 200 US\$) and 5 million VND (approximately 250 US\$), 25.97 earned between 5 million (approximately 250 US\$) and 6 million VND (approximately 350 US\$), and 9.09 earned between 3 million (approximately 150 US\$) and 4 million VND (approximately 200 US\$).² Table 2 displays details about the partners within the couples.

Material and Procedure

A questionnaire assessing spousal influence on purchase decisions was developed based on the study by Davis and Rigaux (1974) and adjusted by Mühlbacher et al. (2009). Rather than focusing on twenty-five product categories as Davis and

Rigaux did, six specific product categories were chosen, which typically fell into the domains of the female, the male, or both partners jointly. Participants assigned the influence in purchase decisions regarding cars, holidays, living room furniture, cooking utensils, computers, and cleaning agents in three decision making phases (problem recognition, search for information, and final decision) either to the female, the male or to both partners jointly.

To directly measure the influence in purchase decisions, the 3-point scale by Davis and Rigaux (1974) was used because it allows a quick response. Each spouse in the household indicated separately whether the decision for one of the goods in one of the three phases was made (1) by the husband alone, (2) by both partners jointly, (3) or by the wife alone. In this case, joint decisions refer to the overall perception and do not distinguish between different degrees of (female and male) influence. In the current study, the general tendencies for decision influence were assessed to guarantee comparability, therefore, the original scale was used.

The questionnaire used by Mühlbacher et al. (2009) was translated from German into Vietnamese and back-translated. A research assistant together with a local person approached married couples in Hanoi and asked them to participate in the study, which took approximately twenty minutes. Each partner in the couple filled in the questionnaire independently; the research assistant and the local person were present and received the questionnaire from each respondent in a sealed envelope to ensure anonymity.

Results

Responses on influence in decisions about the selected products and separately for each decision phase were averaged for each couple and analyzed by drawing a feasibility triangle following Davis and Rigaux (1974). First, influence patterns were analyzed for the total sample; second, the sample was split into three age groups of spouses thirty years old or younger, spouses between 30.1 and 45 years old, and spouses older than the age of forty-five. Age of spouses was highly correlated with duration of marriage ($r = .93, p < .00$). Therefore, a split of the sample on duration of marriage yielded no different results which are, thus, not reported separately.

The extent of role specialization was calculated for males and females of the total sample (Figure 1) and the three age groups (Figure 2) by each decision phase and selected product. The results are displayed in Davis and Rigaux' feasibility triangles. Role specialization indicates the percentage of decisions that are taken jointly. It ranges from extremely specialized (0 percent) to not specialized at all (100 percent) and is presented on the x -axis. The relative influence of male and female spouses was calculated by averaging all answers of the male and female samples, ranging from 1 (= *male*) to 2 (= *both jointly*) to 3 (= *female*). The drawn lines indicate the changes of role specialization from the first to the third decision phase.

Decisions on traditionally female-dominated items, such as cooking utensils and cleaning agents, clearly showed the

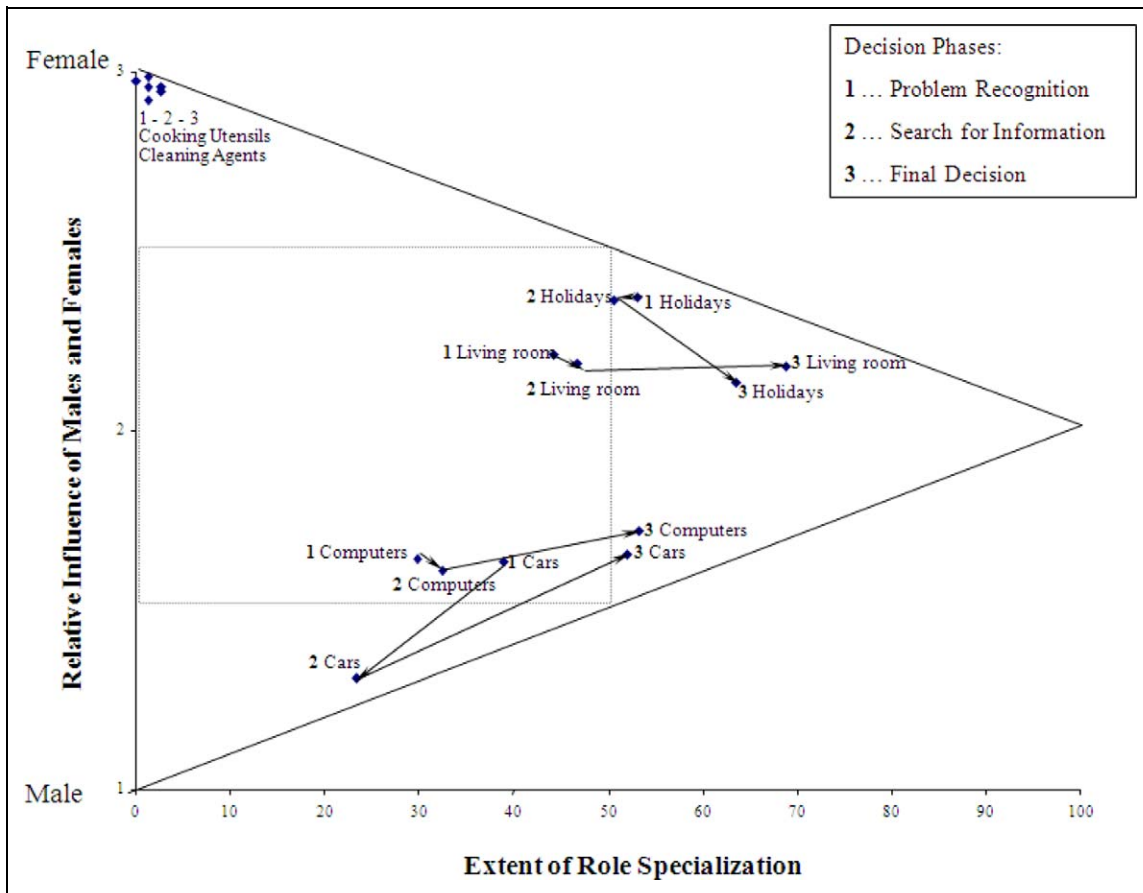


Figure 1. Influence distribution in private households by product categories and decision phases (Total sample, N = 154).

highest role specialization and the smallest change within the three phases of decision making and almost no differences between the age groups. Decisions on traditionally male-dominated products (i.e., cars and computers) showed a somewhat different pattern: while decisions on computers in all three decision phases seem to be taken jointly³ (i.e., equally dominated products), problem recognition regarding cars is clearly male-dominated, whereas information seems to be searched jointly by the partners and the final decision on buying a car is made jointly. With respect to decisions on traditionally equally dominated goods (i.e., holidays and living room furniture), all decision phases show low sex-role specialization, suggesting that decisions are often made jointly. These results clearly support Hypothesis 1 stating that depending on the product category, either the wife or the husband dominates a decision.

With regard to spouses' influence over the three decision phases, no clear results were found: the desire for a car or recognition of the need for a computer seem to be often expressed by the husband, whereas desires for living room furniture or a holiday are expressed by both or by the wife. Information about product alternatives is searched more often by both partners jointly rather than autonomously by one partner, and the decision to buy seems to be taken most likely by both jointly. Results by Davis and Rigaux (1974) and Mühlbacher et al.

(2009) suggest that in Western countries, the need for traditionally jointly decided products is expressed by both partners, whereas one partner takes the responsibility to collect information, and after evaluating the information, both spouses decide jointly about the purchase.

The reported patterns of results for the total sample were also found in three age subgroups. However, compared to middle-aged and older couples, young couples showed the lowest role specialization in the three phases of deciding about holidays and living room furniture and the most joint decisions. Also, the purchase of computers and cars is not clearly dominated by husbands. Especially the need for and purchase of computers and cars are often expressed jointly or by the wife or husband. Information collection about cars, however, is dominated by husbands.

Overall, the results from the Vietnamese sample are very similar to results obtained by Davis and Rigaux (1974) as well as those reported in more recent studies (e.g., Belch and Willis 2002; Mühlbacher et al. 2009). What stands out most is the high specialization with traditionally female-dominated products, which are solely decided by females.

Congruence between answers from both partners is high (between 93 percent and 100 percent), which indicates that both partners gave almost identical answers. With respect to the age groups, younger couples always agreed with regard to their

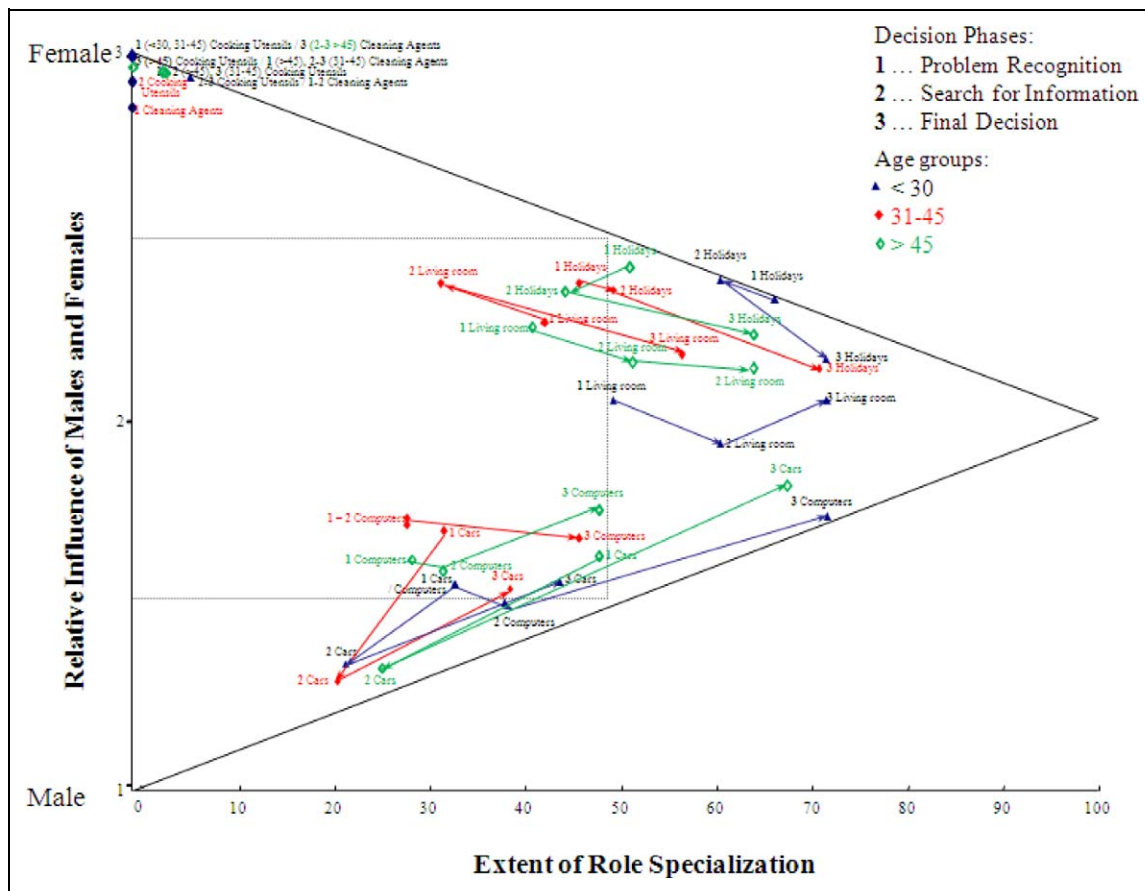


Figure 2. Influence distribution in private households by age groups, product categories, and decision phases (N = 154).

answers; the remaining two age groups showed high congruence rates (see Tables 3 and 4). Therefore, no adjustments for incongruence were necessary. Compared to previous studies, congruence rates in Vietnamese households is much higher than in Western households (e.g., Belch and Willis 2002; Mühlbacher et al. 2009).

To account for differences of decisions between the age groups, product categories, and decision phases, χ^2 tests were conducted based on frequencies displayed in Table 4. No differences were found, indicating that age did not have a statistically significant effect on influence patterns in the sample at the time of data collection (see Table 5).

Discussion

The aim of the present article was to identify sex roles in Vietnamese couples' purchase decisions and to detect possible changes in purchases traditionally dominated by either the wife or husband. Influence patterns reported by wives and husbands in decisions about selected products over three decision phases were investigated. Hypothesis 1 was clearly supported by the data: the type of product category relates to high sex-role specialization in Vietnamese households. Women are still responsible for traditionally female-dominated items, such as cooking and kitchen items; whereas men dominate

purchase decisions for cars and computers. However, domination of purchases of computers and cars is not exclusively the domain of husbands. Decisions on holidays and living room furniture—items traditionally dominated jointly by both spouses—are made jointly by both spouses also in Vietnam. The typical Western result of joint expressions of the desire for a product, autonomous collection of information about product alternatives, and joint final decisions, was less clear in the sample. Vietnamese couples reported more often joint information collection after having realized the need for a product.

The most relevant hypothesis regarded changing sex roles and influence pattern. While it was not possible in the present study to collect longitudinal data to observe changes in sex roles over the life span of couples, cross-sectional samples were used and couples born before and after the Vietnamese War and middle-aged couples were compared. No clear differences emerged between the three age groups to confirm a change in sex roles in Vietnam. However, the results show that traditionally jointly dominated items are bought jointly by younger spouses even more often than by older spouses. The assumption that the new generation of young Vietnamese middle-class couples born after the war would display different sex-role specialization and influence patterns than middle-aged and older couples was thus not supported.

Table 3. Frequencies of Male and Female Answers in Decisions about Products and Decision Phases (per Couple)

		Decision By				Incongruent Answers			%
		N	Female	Both	Male	F/M	M/B	F/B	
Male-dominated product categories	Cars								
	1 Problem recognition	77	9	30	36	0	2	0	97
	2 Information search	77	3	18	56	0	0	0	100
	3 Final decision	77	5	40	31	0	1	0	99
	Computers								
	1 Problem recognition	77	13	23	40	0	1	0	99
Total	2 Information search	77	11	25	41	0	0	0	100
	3 Final decision	77	7	41	28	0	1	0	99
			48	177	232		5	0	
Equally dominated product categories	Holidays								
	1 Problem recognition	77	32	41	3	0	0	1	99
	2 Information search	77	33	39	5	0	0	0	100
	3 Final decision	77	19	53	5	0	0	0	100
	Living room furniture								
	1 Problem recognition	77	28	34	12	0	1	2	96
Total	2 Information search	77	27	36	13	0	0	1	99
	3 Final decision	77	18	49	8	1	0	1	97
			157	252	46	1	1	5	
Female-dominated product categories	Cooking utensils								
	1 Problem recognition	77	76	1	0	0	0	0	100
	2 Information search	77	74	2	1	0	0	0	100
	3 Final decision	77	74	2	0	1	0	0	99
	Cleaning agents								
	1 problem recognition	77	73	1	2	1	0	0	99
Total	2 Information search	77	75	1	1	0	0	0	100
	3 Final decision	77	76	0	1	0	0	0	100
			448	7	5		0	0	
Total			653	436	283	3	6	5	

Note. M = male partner decides; F = female partner decides; B = both partners decide; Incongruent answers: F/M, M/B, F/B. % relative congruence of male and female partners in a household.

Consumers who are part of the middle class in Vietnam probably have enjoyed higher standards of living due to higher incomes and good jobs of both partners independent of age. Therefore, independent of age, wives may more readily than men shed their traditional sex roles and accede to male-dominated decision areas. The finding that computers and cars are not the domain of men alone might be interpreted as women’s interest in formerly male-dominated technical items and their readiness to make autonomous decisions on such products. Their decision making interests and responsibilities are relevant for marketers and due to their higher than average income, high spending power, and interest in expensive products, women may gain the interest of marketers in formerly male-dominated product categories.

Vietnamese consumers have only recently begun to engage actively in the market. The collected data can therefore provide a basis for observations on decision making patterns in social networks, such as the family, and consequently offer important insights for businesses. The traditional sex-role stereotype is still dominant in Vietnam, no matter which age group is investigated. However, the results suggest that slight changes may have taken place and will be more visible in the future, which marketers should not ignore.

The findings of the present study contribute to the understanding of the interactions between markets, marketing, and society. Social transaction mechanisms in the household are manifold and linked to other social systems. First, a household demands and is willing to spend money on goods that deliver status and prestige (user of final products); second, marital power is negotiated within the household and resources are allocated and transferred; third, the household is a supplier of labor. It reflects and supplements recent sociopolitical achievements, such as gender equality in the labor market.

Vietnamese middle-class households were analyzed. They have changed due to economic and political developments. Economic growth leads to increasing wealth and to changing demand and consumption patterns of middle-class households. Political developments, such as war, changes in political regimes, and a government’s gender and family policy, have proven to influence household structure and marital power. Marketing is challenged to respond to the changed structure and demands. Marketing delivers the goods that the members of a society require. It interacts with society, that is, changes in social structures result in changes in the economic system. From a macroeconomic perspective, the changed educational and occupational situation is reflected in the labor market (cf.

Table 4. Frequencies of Male and Female Answers by Age Groups, Purchased Products, and Decision Phases (per Couple)

		Age < 30 Decision By						Age 31–45 Decision By						Age > 45 Decision By					
		N	F	B	M	I	%	N	F	B	M	I	%	N	F	B	M	I	%
Male-dominated products	Cars																		
	Problem recognition	18	2	6	10	0	100	28	5	9	13	1	96	31	2	15	13	1	97
	Information search	18	1	4	13	0	100	28	1	6	21	0	100	31	1	8	22	0	100
	Final decision	18	1	8	9	0	100	28	2	11	15	0	100	31	2	21	7	1	97
	Computers																		
	Problem recognition	18	2	6	10	0	100	28	6	8	13	1	96	31	5	9	17	0	100
	Information search	18	1	7	10	0	100	28	6	8	14	0	100	31	4	10	17	0	100
	Final decision	18	0	13	5	0	100	28	3	13	12	0	100	31	4	15	11	1	97
	Total		7	44	57	0		23	55	88	2		18	78	87	3			
Equally dominated products	Holidays																		
	Problem recognition	18	6	12	0	0	100	28	12	13	2	1	96	31	14	16	1	0	100
	Information search	18	7	11	0	0	100	28	12	14	2	0	100	31	14	14	3	0	100
	Final decision	18	4	13	1	0	100	28	6	20	2	0	100	31	9	20	2	0	100
	Living Room Furniture																		
	Problem recognition	18	5	9	4	0	100	28	11	12	4	1	96	31	12	13	4	2	94
	Information search	18	3	11	4	0	100	28	14	9	4	1	96	31	10	16	5	0	100
	Final decision	18	3	13	2	0	100	28	8	16	3	1	96	31	7	20	3	1	97
	Total		28	69	11	0		63	84	17	4		66	99	18	3			
Female-dominated products	Cooking utensils																		
	Problem recognition	18	18	0	0	0	100	28	28	0	0	0	100	31	30	1	0	0	100
	Information search	18	17	1	0	0	100	28	27	0	1	0	100	31	30	1	0	0	100
	Final decision	18	17	1	0	0	100	28	27	1	0	0	100	31	30	0	0	1	97
	Cleaning agents																		
	Problem recognition	18	17	1	0	0	100	28	26	0	2	0	100	31	30	0	0	1	97
	Information search	18	17	1	0	0	100	28	27	0	1	0	100	31	31	0	0	0	100
	Final decision	18	18	0	0	0	100	28	27	0	1	0	100	31	31	0	0	0	100
	Total		104	4	0	0		162	1	5	0		182	2	0	2			
Total		139	117	68	0		248	140	110	6		266	179	105	8				

Note. M = male partner decides; F = female partner decides; B = both partners decide; I = incongruent answers (F/M, M/B, F/B). % relative congruence of male and female partners in a household.

Dixon 1984). Low gender inequality is also manifested in sex roles and allocation of activities within a household.

In terms of future trends for sex roles and their implications for markets, marketing, and society, we conclude that due to changed cultural norms and ongoing economic development, sex roles will develop toward greater gender equality in society and in households. In the long run, as several studies have shown, spouses in transforming societies behave similarly to Western consumers. This means that more global consumer segments will develop, toward which marketing can react and increase social welfare (e.g., supporting gender equality in signaling respective values in advertising or offering convenience goods in smaller packaging). However, cultural idiosyncrasies will remain since educational and occupational statuses in transforming/emerging markets are considered cultural variables, which determine family role structures externally, that is, cultural norms rather than individual decisions are relevant (cf. Yavas, Babakus, and Delener 1994). Government policy can play an important role in this respect, as studies on family policy have shown (cf. Ekström and Hjort 2010; Nill and Shultz 2010; Yang et al. 2006).

The current study does not come without limitations and offers suggestions for future research. Comparing results from this study with other studies in which data were collected, for example, using diary techniques (Kirchler et al. 2001), it seems

that stereotypical decision patterns are less likely to be reported in diary studies than in conventional surveys. The advantage of using diaries for consumer decision making is the immediate description of real behavior and less biases from recalling often mundane events (e.g., Belch and Willis 2002; Mühlbacher et al. 2009). In addition, decisions over a longer period of time can be observed and family dynamics can be taken into consideration when interpreting decision processes. However, a possible disadvantage of the diary method is the high effort to recruit and maintain study participants, especially when dealing with couples, and the need to commit both spouses to complete the diary over a long period of time.

Additional important information, such as real possessions in a household, should be taken into consideration in future studies. As outlined in the introduction, the Vietnamese possess on average, 1.1 cars per household, and spending patterns have changed just recently. Therefore, not only general information about selected product categories should be considered but also a longitudinal design should be adopted to observe changes in possessions and respective role specialization in decision making. Similarly, future research may focus on product attributes and alternatives in more detail and study couples' decision making as a process rather than an outcome (Park 1982).

Based on the results of the present study, further research should investigate antecedents of role specialization in

Table 5. Comparison of Age Groups (χ^2 Statistics)

		Age groups			
		χ^2	N	df	p
Male-dominated products	Cars				
	Problem recognition	6.52	77	8	.59
	Information search	.34	77	4	.98
	Final decision	8.14	77	6	.23
	Computers				
	Problem recognition	2.81	77	6	.83
Equally dominated products	Problem recognition	2.45	77	4	.65
	Information search	5.99	77	6	.42
	Final decision	4.52	77	6	.61
	Holidays	2.35	77	4	.67
	Problem recognition	.59	77	4	.96
	Information search	6.06	77	10	.81
Female-dominated products	Information search	7.99	77	6	.24
	Final decision	4.34	77	8	.83
	Living room furniture				
	Problem recognition	1.50	77	2	.47
	Information search	3.14	77	4	.54
	Final decision	3.00	77	4	.56
Female-dominated products	Cooking utensils				
	Problem recognition	8.29	77	6	.22
	Information search	5.07	77	4	.28
	Final decision	1.77	77	2	.41
	Cleaning agents				
	Problem recognition				

households in transforming markets, and rather than comparing age groups, cultural aspects and symbolic meanings of products could be more relevant dimensions in defining Vietnamese consumer segments. In this respect, research on East Asian household decision making could include the influence in decision making from other members in the extended family as an important cultural aspect.

The impact of culture on family decision making has been identified in several studies (e.g., Ford, LaTour, and Henthorne 1995). It would be interesting to study if in a culture such as Vietnam or in East Asian consumer culture in general, the collectivist aspect in family decision making (in the current study, it was found that both partner engage in information search, while in Western cultures autonomous behavior is observed) overruled changes that arise from higher gender equality, Western lifestyle and in general higher consumption rates.

The current research revealed two important findings on Vietnamese households' decision making: first, sex roles hardly differ between different age groups, signaling that over time they have not yet changed. Second, along higher gender equality certain stages in the decision making process might change due to economic and social reasons. Both findings should be looked at more closely in future studies on East Asian household decision making.

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Notes

1. See also the effects on women's labor during and after World War II in the United States when significant economic and social change occurred (Goldin 1991).
2. According to the General Statistics Office Vietnam, the average monthly income per capita for the whole country was 995,000 VND (50 US\$) in 2008; for urban areas 1,605,200 VND (about 80 US\$), and for the Red River Delta river where Hanoi is located, the average monthly income per capita was 1,048,500 VND (53 US\$; General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2008).
3. Davis and Rigaux (1974) distinguish between autonomic, that is, highly specialized roles and joint influence, and syncratic decisions, which are low specialized joint decisions.

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