Living Legacies: Exploring Influences on Family Consumption Behavior

Session Chair: Eric Arnould, University of Nebraska
Discussion Leader: Suraj Commuri, University of Missouri

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Session Chair: Eric J. Arnould, University of Arizona
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Enacting the Family Legacy: How Family Themes Influence Consumption Behavior
Amber M. Epp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
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Studied across diverse disciplines, researchers have demonstrated that family legacies are powerful drivers of behavior, but consumer researchers lack an understanding of how legacies shape consumption-related behavior in particular. Specifically, this study explores how families’ intangible legacies or narrative themes influence family consumption behavior. We examine both the processes of influence and the consumption-related outcomes relevant to identity. Based on projective research and narrative analysis, study findings offer preliminary indications of the diverse and evocative influences that family legacies have on consumer activities and contribute to research streams on collective identity projects, socialization processes and intergenerational transfers.

Maybe It IS Your Father’s Oldsmobile: The Symbolic Dimensions of Intergenerationally Transferred Possessions and the Adoption of Corresponding Possession Meanings
Carolyn F. Curasi, Georgia State University

Although research suggests that some familial possessions serve as symbolic vehicles with the ability to imaginatively extend the family forward in time, the role of possessions in constructing and preserving group identity has received little quantitative research attention. Consumers’ feelings about familial possessions, the symbolic dimensions of these items and the generalizability of these feelings are examined in this personal interview and survey-based research employing a national, random sample. Quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that consumers care very deeply about possessions received from older family members and identify with the values expressed in the accompanying stories. Thus, maybe it is your father’s Oldsmobile. Money and Meaning: The Role of Social Capital in Inter Vivos Gifting
Tonya P. Williams, Northwestern University

Money has been recognized as having the potential to transfer meaning based on its sources and uses. The relationship between money, as an asset, and consumer behavior has been examined with a focus on the individual. The intergenerational consumer behavior literature provides theorizing on meaning transfer through possessions. This research seeks to understand intergenerational meaning transfer via assets, an alienable possession. The preliminary analysis of 53 depth interviews provides insight to assets as vehicles for intergenerational meaning transfer and sustenance. A conceptual model centered on social capital is presented as the medium of meaning transfer via assets intergenerationally.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
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SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW
Family legacy offers a unifying construct through which to view diverse areas of family consumer research. Family legacies are studied across disciplines including family therapy (Gold and Morris 2003; King and Wynne 2004.), psychology (Bennett, Wolin and McAvity 1988), family studies (Piercey and Chapman 2001), accounting (Swaim 2004), communication studies (Vangelisti, Crumley and Baker 1999), literature (Stone 1988) and family nursing (Plager 1999). With its origins entrenched in the psychology and family therapy literatures, researchers often focus on how to change or re-edit the family legacy, as a way of transforming negative and constraining themes. Few researchers have examined positive outcomes related to family legacies.

Plager (1999) defines legacy as “a living tradition, an aspect of the family’s life world reshaped over time in a family’s particular situation and influenced by family, culture, and society” (p. 52). Family legacies are built, preserved, enacted, and fluctuate. They are living traditions that both the tacit and explicit consumer behaviors of families continuously amend and rework. Finally, and most importantly for consumer researchers, the family myths, life themes, and group conceptions that form a significant part of legacies influence people’s lives as consumers and beyond (Bennett, Wolin and McAvity 1988; Papp and Imber-Black 1996). While intergenerational studies in consumer research reveal that consumption practices are transferred between generations (Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002), fewer studies could be classified as exploring the centrality of family legacies in this arena (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Kozinets et al. 2005). Whether family members wholeheartedly embrace their family legacies or vehemently reject them, research suggests that family members are undeniably influenced by their family legacies (Stone 1988).

Exploring new theoretical and empirical views of family consumption behavior as it relates to families’ intergenerational legacies, the session addressed family legacies in the form of lasting themes or family myths that shape behavior and through an examination of both alienable and inalienable wealth that represent and constitute intergenerational family legacies. Collectively, the papers represent meso-level theorizing of family consumption behavior. The papers drew on a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches that made the session dynamic and enlightening.

We began our exploration of family legacies with a presentation by Amber Epp, co-authored with Eric Arnould, underscoring how family legacies, conceptualized as lasting themes, influence consumption behavior. This presentation examined both the processes of influence and consumption-related outcomes. In other words, these researchers examined how family legacies influence consumption behavior in families. The first presentation extended on prior theoretical research that posited a model of family identity enactment (Epp and Price 2005) and described the results of a study based on projective techniques. The second presentation by Carolyn Curasi addressed the distinctive value of inalienable wealth in embodying and transmitting family legacies across generations of family. This paper, based on an ongoing study of inalienable wealth, examined dyadic depth interview and survey data. The third presentation by Tonya Williams explored alienable assets, in the form of money, as a resource for building and transferring family legacies. Williams used in-depth interview data and investigated the role of inter vivos monetary gifts in transferring shared familial meanings. To summarize, the session examined legacies of beliefs, values, and family meanings that can be passed across generations of family and are central to a collective sense of identity.

Drawing on his knowledge and research on families, Suraj Commuri served as discussion leader in the session. Commuri’s thoughtful commentary sparkled discussion on the career of commitment to a legacy, considering the formation, acquisition, adaptation and reformation of legacies over time. Specifically, audience members contemplated the process of legacy transformation, survival and failure in light of disruptions, such as when associated objects, possessions or alienable assets are destroyed.

“Enacting the Family Legacy: How Family Themes Influence Consumption Behavior”
Amber M. Epp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Eric J. Arnould, University of Arizona

Consumer researchers have demonstrated links between families’ consumption behavior and their collective identities (Belk 1988; Epp and Price 2005; McCracken 1989; Moisio, Price and Arnould 2004). Constituted within a family’s identity, overarching family themes or legacies have been recognized by scholars and clinical practitioners alike. Family themes can reflect shared values related to work, religion and family life (King and Wynne 2004). For instance, common legacies reported by the families in our sample included legacies of close/supportive, faith/service, health/athletics, hard work, and others. While family legacies are powerful drivers of behavior (Papp and Imber-Black 1996), we know little about their influences on consumption-related behavior in particular. As such, the research question guiding this paper is “how do family legacies/themes influence family consumption behavior?” Specifically, we examined the intersection of socialization processes, family legacy enactment and consumption outcomes.

This project draws on a model of family identity enactment, which posits that families enact their identities in various communication forms such as rituals, narratives, intergenerational transfers, and everyday interactions, and that consumer activities serve as symbols of family identity enactment (Epp and Price 2005). Our current paper extends this idea by examining family legacies as the embodiment of a family’s identity. It argues that consumption behaviors are one way in which families enact their legacies.

We employed a projective technique which is an appropriate method for “understanding consumers’ inner thoughts and feelings…[about] what consumers often cannot or will not verbalize in more direct, verbal measures such as interviews and surveys” (Chang 2001, p. 253). Following Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1997, 2003), we used projectives to elicit participants’ family themes. Forty participants constructed collages representing their families’ identities and wrote essays detailing their interpretations. The interpretations were filled with narratives about their families, and family legacies were prominently featured in the data. Analysis of written narratives is consistent with the dominant methods for studying family legacies (Androuitopoulos 2001; Vangelisti et al. 1999).

To outline our theoretical contributions, we review relevant literature across disciplines beginning with how family legacies are...
passed between and within generations of family. The literature addressing this process mirrors socialization processes in consumer research that focus on family communication patterns (John 1999; Moschis 1985). For instance, a wide body of research connects the transmission of legacies to family storytelling (Fiese et. al. 1995, King and Wynne 2004; Vangelisti et al. 1999). In addition, Bolea (2000) asserts that each generation influences the philosophies and themes of descendants through direct messages and replication of behavior. Similarly, Stone (1988) describes evidence of families using a family member as a model for the legacies or themes they wish to reproduce. Other forms of transmission include “kin keeping” practices like sharing family photos or passing on family recipes, music, or rituals. Finally, family legacies can be preserved, constructed and enacted in the transmission of families’ inalienable wealth (Curasi et al. 2004).

While our findings confirm the transmission of legacies through narratives, family interaction, modeling, and verbal instruction, we found that enacting and passing on legacies within the family is complex. Specifically, our data reveal the relationship between a family’s legacies and individual family members’ commitment to those legacies is dynamic. In some cases, individuals embraced and/or extended the legacies and in other cases, participants rejected the legacies. Thus, consumer socialization is challenged, contested and fueled by activities related to family legacies. In addition, scholars should pay attention to family legacies because they moderate the formation and development of both familial and individual identity projects.

A few important questions emerged from this data that we could not address in this study. First, how do differences in commitment to family legacies relate to consumption outcomes? We might speculate that when individuals embrace family legacies, we would see continuity in family identity, a continuance of intergenerational transfers and loyalty to products, brands, or activities that support that legacy. On the other hand, when family members reject legacies, we might observe tension between individual and family identity, adoption of alternative consumption behaviors, and dissipation of intergenerational transfers related to the legacy. Second, what might we learn by adopting a developmental perspective? Just as dominant narratives and ideologies are challenged, reshaped and sustained, examining family legacy enactment over time might suggest that family legacies that are inconsistent or rejected are, at that particular point in time, being challenged by individual family members. This would suggest that rejection/inconsistency is part of the process of reshaping legacies over time.

Researchers have also demonstrated direct links between family legacies and behavioral outcomes. For instance, as Papp and Imber-Black (1996) argue, central themes underpin individual and family decisions and behaviors. As such, our behaviors, and subsequent stories about our behaviors, reinforce the family legacy (Stone 1988). Further, themes “regulate interaction with the external world and can influence interpersonal involvement within the family” (Bennett, Wolin and McAvity 1988, p. 212). Emergent themes in our data offer indications of the diverse and evocative influences that family legacies have on consumption behavior, particularly related to collective identity. In particular, families in our study selected consumer activities based on their fit with the legacy: shaping the activities and services families elected to participate in, the products and brands they selected, their attitudes toward media and in a few cases, their decision-making processes. Interestingly, legacy types were differentially related to consumption outcomes. For instance, legacies of sophistication, frugality, and hard work were reflected in the attitudes family members had toward consumption. Whereas, legacies of health, education, hard work, and closeness were related to the products these families purchased. This is surprising because it seems that if legacies provide a blueprint for action, each of the legacies should direct consumption behavior. The content of the legacy should not matter, but it does! More research is needed to delineate these differential relationships.

Papp and Imber-Black (1996) demonstrate that themes operate at many levels and trace the evolution of themes intergenerationally. The last pattern that emerged from the data was that in families with strong intergenerational influences, legacies were reflected in more categories of consumer behavior. For these participants, legacies that could be traced through their families to their grandparents or even great-grandparents seemed to be more pervasive with regard to consumption outcomes. The intergenerational literature reveals that families transfer brands, attitudes and behaviors across generations (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002). However, consumer researchers have yet to delineate what differentiates families who engage in intergenerational transfers from those who do not. We speculate that family legacies offer one underlying process for explaining intergenerational consumption practices.

“Maybe it IS Your Father’s Oldsmobile: The Construction and Preservation of Family Identity through the Transfer of Possessions”

Carolyn F. Curasi, Georgia State University

In recent years there has been a growing body of literature providing insights about familial and individuals’ cherished possessions. These investigations, however, are typically qualitative projects with small purposive samples that could be influenced by self selection bias. This research project seeks to examine the pervasiveness of some of the most common themes emanating from these previous investigations. In exploring family possession transfers and the associated family identity that may also transfer, many literature streams inform this investigation including: cherished possessions; identity and values; intergenerationally transferred possessions; family communication; storytelling; and human memory.

Possessions play a profound role in the construction and preservation of personal identity (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Mehta and Belk 1991; Belk 1988; Gentry, Baker, and Kraft 1995; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). We are able to extend ourselves and thus our identities through our possessions, our family members and the cultures within which we are embedded (Belk 1988). Some familial possessions serve as symbolic vehicles with the ability to extend the familial group forward in time. Through the achievements of our ancestors we are able to bask in the glories of their accomplishments (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Weiner 1994).

Individual’s values are deeply patterned and personal, essential for understanding our personal identity. We become committed to those identities that best enable us to express values we feel most strongly about (Erickson 1995; Gecas 1986; Hitlin 2003). Although the role of possessions in constructing and preserving personal identity has received a great deal of attention, the role of possessions in the construction and definition of family identity has received relatively little research attention (Epp and Price 2005).

Possessions transferred intergenerationally are bundled with object stories, serving as a means to educate and socialize younger family members (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). The stories we hear in early childhood become important frames of reference or mental models that later influence our behavior, including our.
consumption behavior (Connerton 1995; Schank 1996; Zaltman 2003). We remember by telling stories (Engel 1999; Schank and Abelson 1995) and thus, family stories attached to tangible objects such as family heirlooms can be a very effective way to communicate rich life lessons to younger family members.

This project took place in two phases. First, qualitative data were examined for overarching themes. In addition, family possession origin stories were examined for the lessons and values communicated by the ritual retelling of these stories. In the second phase of this project the pervasiveness of the main themes generated in the first phase of this project were examined with data from a random, national mailed sample collected in the spring of 2005. Two hundred and fifty three respondents between the ages of 18 and 93 responded, for approximately a nine percent response rate.

Possession stories commonly included lessons that served to teach and communicate with younger family members about strongly held family values. These possession stories were thick with messages about family values, and illustrated family values such as: the status and esteem of the family lineage and name, valuing of art and culture, the innate ability of the lineage to overcome hardship; the importance of carefully selecting a spouse; patriotism; the importance of family and marriage; and the valuing of religion.

In addition, supporting previous investigations, many of our informants communicated their desire to know that their cherished family possessions would be passed forward through their lineage. Our informants discussed their hope that younger family members would understand and pass forward the possession stories as well as the favorite object. In depth interviews informants discuss their heirlooms as being their heritage, reflecting their personal identity.

The qualitative results suggest that many of the responses of informants in the qualitative research can be generalized to a far larger population. For example, to the statement, “My most cherished possessions reflect who I am,” sixty-seven percent of our sample agreed. Almost as many, sixty-one percent, of our informants also agreed with the statement, “My family possessions communicate our family values.” A very large percentage of respondents, eighty-six percent, agreed with the statement, “I hope my loved ones will care about my cherished possessions.” Ninety-five percent of respondents also revealed they plan to pass on family possessions to family members. Responses to these statements as well as others in the survey provide preliminary evidence that the ideas and intentions of many informants in previous interpretive investigations can be found in the general population. Respondents also reveal a strong symbolic element to their most cherished possessions that gave these items a value that far exceeded their monetary value.

Consistent with a growing body of qualitative research, a majority of respondents: feel that their cherished possessions reflect who they are; hope that their loved ones will care about their cherished possessions; plan to pass on family possessions to family members; and feel their family possessions communicate their family values. The comments, attitudes and hopes reflected in qualitative research projects were found to be pervasive in the national, random mailed survey.

Values are communicated and transferred via the stories that are bundled with cherished possessions. These stories serve as an extremely effective format with which to teach and communicate family identity and family values (Connerton 1995; Zaltman 2003). Thus, this research suggests that consumers are socialized about those values that their older family members hold dear via the storytelling rituals associated with intergenerationally transferred possessions. Because the human mind functions not by processing letters and words but through processing images, and metaphors, attaching storytelling to cherished family possessions increases the potential for future family members to be educated about the values viewed as important by the older members of the family (Connerton 1995). This research suggests that there is a pervasive desire to learn family stories and to pass those forward through the lineage.

This research stream could benefit from data that includes respondents that were under-represented in this sample, such as Hispanics and African-Americans as well as a larger percentage of younger informants.

“Money and Meaning: The Role of Social Bonds and Capital in Inter Vivos Gifting”
Tonya P. Williams, Northwestern University

…I grew up in a family business—the family was a part of the business and the business was a part of the family…. (White Female, 40s)

My aunt owned this salon—she moved into the building when it was first built and I worked with her when I was younger...I came back...when she retired...I kept some of her clients too… (African-American Female, 50s)

…on my 8th birthday my grandfather anointed me the future leader of two large corporations… inheriting Coca-Cola stock developed [business] interests which are now managed by the 4th generation of our family... (White Male, 80s)

Consumer research includes several facets of the consumption experience, yet the literature is sparse on the role of assets in consumption. In the lives of these informants and extant literature we observe that assets encompass, imbue, and transfer meanings (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). I examine inter vivos asset gifting to construct a theory of how alienable assets transfer meaning in contemporary American families. My research considers the allocation of assets to mental and emotional budgets and the role of the respective budgets in meaning transfer.

Gifts are the most common type of assistance between generations (Cheal 1996). Gift giving is an embedded process of social exchange and communication (Mauss 1967; Sherry 1983) serving to establish, maintain, and alter social roles (Otnes et al. 1993). Further, gifts serve higher-order needs of love and self-actualization (Belk 1996). The propensity to provide an inter vivos asset gift is related to an individual’s access to means, desire, and available transfer options. Wealth in America is equally distributed across three categories: business and real estate, home equity, and stocks and bonds, though there are differences in asset composition across class (Weicher 1997). Very wealthy Americans have income producing assets, such as businesses, real estate, equities, or trusts, typically involving enduring relationships. The majority of the population have assets resulting from specific transactions requiring minimal relationship persistence, such as the purchase of principal residences, automobiles, or life insurance (Kennickell et al. 1996). Though few inherit, many receive inter vivos asset gifts.

Americans’ acquisition thirst has been studied broadly, however there is a dearth of research concerning assets individuals use to achieve goals. Money has a social component, though
researchers have considered money beyond a vehicle of exchange (Zelizer 1989; Zhou and Pham 2004). Gifts of alienable assets have not been broadly studied, however relationships supporting gifting of heirlooms have been examined and contributed to theories of meaning transfer (Curasi et al. 2003; Price et al. 2000). Researchers have also shown that alienable assets are imbued with meaning and emotion (Belk and Wallendorf 1990), yet the literature is silent regarding gifts of alienable assets as vehicles for transferring meaning.

Family, consumption, and wealth accumulation have been primarily examined through the frame of the life cycle model, and non-income related influencers. Family and non-income related influencers have been included in the study of meaning creation and transfer in consumer behavior (Curasi et al. 2003; Ottenes et al. 1993; Price et al. 2000). Consumer researchers have examined gift giving as transferring family legacy, or achieving symbolic immortality through tangible possessions. This literature has focused primarily on the transfer of inalienable possessions (Weiner 1992) and the implication for family relationships (Curasi et al. 2003). Though this literature speaks to meaning transfer processes, it does not address how meaning is maintained across generations when assets have salient alienable characteristics.

The role of money as a vehicle for meaning as well as a resource for consumption is a critical piece of the consumer behavior puzzle. Through understanding how individuals acquire and account for resources, I present a model of alienable assets as vehicles of meaning transfer. The model put forth describes how assets traverse market and family space as well as mental and emotional budgets in the creation and transfer of meaning across relationships.

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