Marketing Generations: Intergenerational Aspects of Consumer Culture

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Re-framing mother-daughter relations as a dialectic and taking an oral-history method this paper shows intergenerational memory to converge in shared family signatures of consumption. It responds to Wilkie and Moore’s (2005) call for intergenerational research that it ‘layered’ and shows how shifts in consumer culture are incorporated across family generations.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014058/volumes/v10e/E-10

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT  
Consumer research holds a relatively long preoccupation with intergenerational influences (or carry-over effects) that capture the social reproduction of behaviours, attitudes and values from one generation to the next. Intergenerational transmission can be interpreted as a form of market stability, which in turn can be used to underpin theories of long term brand value and brand equity development (Bravo et al. 2008; Moore et al. 2002; Viswanathan et al. 2000) and consumer socialisation (Eskstrom 2007; Minahan and Huddleston 2010; Moore et al. 2001; Moschis 1985). Studies have examined consistencies in financial planning (Hill 1970; Olsen 1995), brand preferences, choice strategies and marketplace beliefs (Bravo et al. 2008; Mandrik and Fern 2004; Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Moore et al. 2002), the development of market competences and skills such as consumer savvyness (Nancarrow et al. 2008) as well as intentional and perceived brand loyalty (Huggins et al. 2010). A dyadic prediction method is the predominant approach employed in intergenerational studies, where a matching of mother-daughter dyads is sought in terms of behaviour, markets beliefs and markets skills. Mothers and daughters have been shown to often share brand preferences and shopping strategies, suggesting childhood experience is important in the formation of intergenerational agreement, and emphasising a parental modelling approach with a unidirectional flow of influence from mothers to daughters (Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Moore et al. 2002; Perez et al. 2011; Collodo et al. 2012). This study adopts a different conceptualisation of mother-daughter relations. It takes a dialectical approach (Holt 2002; Blume and Blume 2003) to define mother-daughter relations as fluid identity positions that emerge within the context of relationships. Women not only move between mother/daughter roles but can and do occupy both at the same time. Rather than conceptualising intergenerational effects as being activity produced by an ‘older’ generation for passive consumption by the younger, identity positions are formed and reformed through the contradictions and ambiguities that structure them.  

Families have consistencies over time, that implicate consumption and the market and which are central to the replication and solidarify of these norms and values (e.g. Bugge and Alamas 2006; Castano et al. 2010; Curasi et al. 2004; Epp and price 2008; Levy 1981; Moisio et al. 2004; Wallendorf and Arnold 1991), but intergenerational research is complicated by differing definitions and ideas of generation. From a cohort or historical approach generations are constructed as periodic entities made up of individuals of a defined age who experience similar social, political and economic conditions but are limited in their ability to examine cultural transmission down family chains. A family based definition is more localised to particular family units and refer to an inter-relational definition over time but discount cohort conditions completely. Wilkie and Moore (2005) discuss the need for an approach that is ‘layered’ so that it can capture cohort effects that may otherwise remain hidden or under-represented. We show how an oral history methodology is well placed to enable the simultaneous capture of familial and cohort generational influences. Oral history makes visible the artefacts of discourse as they are storied in the everyday of people’s lives (Passerini 2003; Portelli 1991; Thompson 1975, 1981). Oral history does not seek to uncover a literal description of the past but rather is focused on memory; individual, public and generational (Davies 2011). It is in generational memory where similarities across generations are revealed but also where evidence is found to show how each generation is positioned differently as a consequence of the small shifts in discourse over time (Alexander 2009; Kelova 2009; Zhu 2010).  

The data is drawn from 87 in-depth interviews with women in 23 family groups. In most families there were three generations of blood-related women (grandmother, mother and daughter) but due to illness/bereavement the grandmother in two families did not complete the study. All families live in the Midlands, UK. Some were geographically close, others live at a distance. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. In this paper we concentrate on a descriptive commentary of two family chains from the larger data set. The two cases were chosen because they provide interesting contrasts to illuminate the dialectic relation in family chains.  

The data illustrates the evolution of many different aspects of marketing and consumer practice, from the emergence of the supermarkets and self-service and promotion, the development of discourses of choice and the self, as well as ideologies of modernity, progress and consumption. We show shifts in consumer culture from highly organised forms of collective social practice to individuated ‘disorganised’ forms of social practice epitomised most clearly by the supermarket. In family accounts we also observe the emergence of discourses of the self in consumption, consumer identity and the notion of consumption as freedom and markets as sites of progress.  

We show intergenerational memory to converge in shared family signatures of consumption passed from one generation to the next in a dialectical process around notions of ‘control’, ‘innovation’ and ‘progress’. We see that what are often understood by participants as unique and private family signatures are shown to resist, conform and adapt to cohort-like influences across different generations. A similar idea, tradition, behaviour or ritual is qualitatively changed in response to changing times and the market as daughters and mothers in different cohorts makes sense of their own family life. Food preparation, changing food technologies (including the freezer and ‘ready meals’) and retail transformations (including self-service and the supermarket) are examples of sites where family is practiced, negotiated and transformed. It is through these that we trace changes in mass consumer culture and how these become understood and incorporated in family chains.  

We conclude to propose that our approach responds to Wilkie and Moore’s (2005) call for a method of intergenerational analysis that is ‘layered’. We highlight that consistency rather than resistance has been the focus of intergenerational research in marketing and show that consistencies can be recognised and understood to only exist in direct relation to resistances, intentional differences and distinction. We illustrate that mother-daughter relations are different in their similarities and similar in the differences.  

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European Advances in Consumer Research  
Volume 10, © 2013


