Of Friends and Family: How Do Peers Affect the Development of Intergenerational Influences?

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ABSTRACT
This paper draws on 110 life history narratives to examine how intergenerational (IG) influences are affected as peers begin to take on a more prominent role in young consumers’ lives. Although researchers have traditionally assumed that parental influence sharply declines beginning in adolescence, our findings reveal a more complex picture. Our life histories reveal that peers are readily invoked as benchmarks against which family wealth, spending patterns and lifestyle are assessed. Manifestations of the rich interplay between parental and peer influences are presented. Our study enriches conceptual models by focusing on joint parent-peer impacts rather than their separate spheres of influence.

INTRODUCTION
Traditional socialization theory suggests that childhood learning is so prolonged and powerful that the beliefs and attitudes formed during this period persist well into adulthood. Family members, peers, educational institutions, religious institutions, and the mass media each contribute in important ways to this process (e.g. Faber and O’Guinn 1988). The family is the first and typically the most powerful agent of socialization. No other source enjoys such a cumulative edge in exposure, communication and receptivity (Moore, Wilkie and Alder 2001). However, as a child matures other sources of influence such as peer groups become increasingly important. Beginning in early adolescence peers aid in the development of an individual’s personal identity as well as in the search for autonomy that characterizes this life stage (Moschis 1987). Researchers have traditionally assumed that parental influence declines as peers begin to assume a more prominent role in the lives of young consumers (Ward 1974). However, more recent evidence in the social sciences suggests that rather than shifting away from parents, adolescents typically try to maintain these relationships and often consult parents when making decisions (Raja, McGee and Stanton 1992). This is consistent with studies of intergenerational influence (IG) that have revealed enduring impacts of the family on the consumer behavior of young adults (e.g., Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002).

To this point, consumer researchers have provided useful insights into the respective spheres of influence that parents and peers have in the socialization process. For example, some studies have attempted to quantify their relative influence in specific domains (e.g., Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Churchill 1978). Other studies have provided rich perspectives by focusing on the role of a single agent of socialization (e.g., Palan and Wilkes 1997). However, we have yet to capture the ways in which parents and peers simultaneously affect young consumers. These sources of influence may sometimes converge thus reinforcing particular actions or lifestyles, and at others provide conflicting recommendations that a young consumer must adapt to and resolve.

The idea for this paper arose while working on a larger project that examines the role of intergenerational impacts on materialism and financial well-being. In our qualitative research we found, somewhat unexpectedly, frequent mention of friends, acquaintances and peers as a general referent or benchmark. This was intriguing, and seemed to offer a valuable opportunity to learn more about how parental and peer influences operate simultaneously. Thus, our specific goal in this paper is to explore how intergenerational influences (IG) may be affected as peers begin to take on a more significant role in young people’s lives. To do so, we draw on the findings from an interpretive study using 110 life history narratives that were collected from young adult men and women.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND
Consumer Socialization
Socialization is the process by which individuals learn the social roles and behaviors needed to participate effectively in society (Brim 1968). It helps people to develop their self-identities, and to assume new roles as they progress through the life cycle. Although socialization is a life long process, childhood and adolescence are thought to be particularly significant periods. Consumer socialization represents one domain within this larger process. It has been defined as “the processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward 1974, p.2). A number of interesting topics have been studied such as the development of consumer knowledge and decision making skills, the relative influence of consumer socialization agents, the impacts of parental style on consumer learning, and the influence of children on household buying decisions (e.g., Beatty and Talpade 1994; Carlson and Grossbort 1988; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekstrom 1989; John 1999).

Intergenerational Influences in Consumer Behavior
The conceptual basis for IG influences rests within socialization theory. The term ‘intergenerational influence’ refers specifically to the transmission of information, beliefs and resources from one family generation to the next. Since the early 1970s, consumer researchers have shown that IG effects are both significant and potentially important in the marketplace. Although the research base remains relatively small, a number of interesting issues have been studied. Evidence of family transmission has been observed across a range of consumer skills and attitudes such as financial planning skills (Hill 1970; Moore and Berchmans 1996), consumer decision rules (Carlson et al. 1994; Heckler, Childers and Arunchalam 1989), skepticism of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg 2000), as well as brand and product preferences (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002; Olsen 1993; Woodson, Childers and Winn 1976). Thus, theory suggests that family influences constitute a powerful socializing agent in children’s lives: this has been empirically supported in consumer settings. However, there is evidence to suggest that peers also wield influence in important ways.

Investigation of Relative Influence: Parents vs. Peers
In the social sciences, family and peers have traditionally been viewed as the two most important social forces acting on adolescents, but also as competing or dissonant influences (Kandel 1996). Perhaps as a result, when these researchers have studied the relative impacts of peers and parents the primary focus has been on deviant behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. Research on relative influence in consumer settings has focused on explicating the...
specific domains of impact for each source. For example, it has been assumed that parents influence the rational aspects of consumption while peers impact more affective dimensions, such as consumption styles and preferences (Riesman and Roseborough 1955). This is empirically supported by research showing that economic motivations for consumption are shaped by family communications, while peer communications affect social motives and materialism (Moschis and Churchill 1978). Researchers have further shown that older adolescents prefer their parents as an information source when making purchase decisions that rely heavily on price, social acceptance, and product performance while peers are preferred when decisions primarily relate to issues of social acceptance (Moschis and Moore 1979). Parents and peers may also exert different levels of influence depending on whether a product is publicly or privately consumed (Childers and Rao 1992).

Thus, there is evidence that parents and peers each possess specialized roles in the socialization of a young person’s consumer skills and attitudes. Implicitly, this research stream has tended to look at the nature of these contributions in isolation from one another. Yet, there is also evidence that the extent of family and peer communications about consumption are positively correlated (Churchill and Moschis 1979). This seems to suggest that the presence of some degree of specialization does not preclude joint influence on a particular topic. As individuals we are simultaneously exposed to multiple external sources ranging from our broader culture, to various subcultures, family, and reference groups that are each acting to influence our consumer behavior (Wilkie 1994). These sources of influence sometimes converge so as to reinforce particular actions or lifestyles, and at others provide conflicting recommendations to which we must adapt. For young consumers, we know little about how the multiplicity of recommendations they encounter in their daily lives are assessed. Negotiation and resolution may be particularly challenging at this life stage when the desire for autonomy is great, yet personal experience is limited. In the next section, we turn to the unique developmental tasks of this period.

**Development of the Self**

Adolescence has long been characterized as a time when individuals begin to explore and examine the self as a means to discover who they are, and how they fit into their social world (Steinberg and Morris 2001). This view of adolescence as a time of self-exploration dates back to Erickson’s (1950; 1968) theory of the adolescent ‘identity crisis.’ More recent theorizing has supplanted the notion of a crisis, and instead emphasizes the development of personal identity (e.g., Waterman 1999). Identity formation is a long process that begins in adolescence and extends well into early adulthood. Researchers have suggested, for example, that in contemporary society significant aspects of identity are still being formed between the ages of 18 and 22 (Meeus et al. 1999). Consumer behavior is a domain in which self-identity is developed and expressed (see e.g., Arnould and Price 1999). Consumers in late adolescence and early adulthood associate who they are with what they have and do (Belk 1985; 1988). This is a stage in an individual’s development when financial management skills, perspectives on spending and saving, and assessments of the personal significance of material goods begin to coalesce.

Both parents and peers are potentially influential in the process of identity formation. However, conflicting conclusions have been advanced about the relationship between parents and peers in the development of personal identity. For example, based on an extensive review of the literature to that point, Gecas and Seff (1990) speculated that peers and parents act as competing influences during adolescence. They attributed this to the fact that parents and peers may possess opposing values and opinions due to their respective associations with dominant or youth culture. Similarly, Steinberg (2001) suggested that conflict is created as children attempt to emotionally detach from parents. Other researchers have emphasized more harmonious relations. Rather than assuming conflicting impacts, parents and peers are each seen as playing unique but important roles in the process of identity development (Raja et al. 1992; Wilks 1986). Because youth become much more concerned with how the significant people in their lives view them at this stage of life (Erickson 1950), it is important to consider how the inputs from these two sources are reconciled.

Researchers in a number of academic disciplines have suggested that one of the primary ways in which individuals make sense of their lives is through the creation of personal narratives or stories (e.g., Bruner 1986; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Polkinghorne 1988). Narratives help us to interpret, evaluate and integrate our personal experiences. More broadly, life stories are a primary venue for structuring our self-identities. When specifically related to consumption, the telling of life stories allows individuals to impose historical meaning on their consumption activities, as a means of affirming their uniqueness (Arnould and Price 1999; Thompson 1997). In this study, we draw on a specific form of narrative inquiry, the life history method.

**METHOD**

**Research Design and Sample**

The life history method belongs to a broader domain of biographical research methods which tap into personal experience through the use of narrative such as profiles, memoirs, life stories, autobiographies, and diaries (Smith 1994). This is a qualitative research method that is based on the assumption that personal narrative is a particularly useful linguistic form in which human experience can be expressed (Polkinghorne 1995). Thus, it relies upon the “subjective verbal or written expressions of informants, these expressions being windows into the inner life of the person” (Denzin, 1989a, p. 14). Here we use a topical life history approach which focuses investigation on a single phase or domain of an individual’s life (Denzin, 1989b).

Life history narratives were collected from 110 young adult men and women. Posed at the threshold of independence, young adults are a particularly interesting population for the study of IG influences. All of our informants were university students living in off-campus housing. Forty percent were male, and their average age was 21. They had been living away from home for an average of 38 months at the time of the study. The majority (83 %) had grown up in households with mother and father both present. A wide range of family income levels were represented.

Our informants were asked to write personal essays in which they described how their families have affected their consumption style, beliefs and behavior. With an assurance of anonymity, informants were encouraged to share their personal story drawing on specific events in their lives. Consistent with prior research, informants were given a “life history guide” containing a large number of open-ended questions (e.g., Barnhurst and Wartella 1991; Blumer 1933). The guide was designed to direct their attention to the broad domain of interest, yet allow them great freedom to personalize the questions within their own frame of reference (Denzin 1970).

**Analysis**

The essays generated well over 500 pages of transcript which are the primary data from which conceptual categories and relationships were identified. We used a relatively structured process following the discovery-oriented aims and procedures of grounded
theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Each essay was read, and independently coded by the authors. Given our purposes in this paper, our analysis was focused on those sections of the essays in which both parents and peers were discussed. Emergent categories from the first few essays were identified by the second author, and then reviewed in detail by the first author. These initial categories then served as the structural basis for the coding of the remaining essays. Discrepancies were few and resolved through discussion. Data applicable to each category was then sorted, compiled, and evaluated for conceptual fit.

**FINDINGS**

The essays provide a rich set of observations into IG influences. Peers are readily invoked as benchmarks against which our informants’ experiences within their own families can be understood. Their narratives move back and forth through time as they recount significant childhood experiences, and then shift into the present as they describe consumption practices which characterize their behavior now as a young adult. A range of parental influences across time are evident in our data. Friends and acquaintances are also much in evidence whether actively reinforcing IG influences, introducing divergent perspectives, or simply serving as a salient point of comparison.

**Striving for Social Acceptance**

The desire for social acceptance provides a significant backdrop against which our informants describe their childhood experiences. Family wealth and possessions figured prominently in their judgments about whether they were likely to fit in, and to be accepted by their peers. Perceptions of popularity were linked to having nice things, and parents sometimes played an active role in ensuring their child’s acceptance, as in the following:

I always had nice clothes and shoes and expensive hobbies. This just seemed to be one factor of being “popular” at this time. Others looked up to you for having all of these things. As a family we were among the first in our area for example to have a VCR among other things. (114, M)

My house was always the house that kids came over to—they would play the new video games, play with new guns, ride a new bike, big wheel, green machine, etc. In fact, looking back at my childhood I would say that my having so many things was one reason that I was so popular (and I say this with all humbleness). And I think my parents loved buying me things not only because I loved them, but my friends loved these things too. (162, M)

Although popularity was associated with greater wealth in some cases, the relationship is not strictly linear. More commonly expressed was the desire to have an equal amount of possessions as friends and neighbors. This enabled positive social relationships and removed the potential for jealousy. Informants who had more than others as children seem to experience an “embarrassment of riches” and describe how they attempted to conceal their wealth in order to blend socially. Those from less advantaged backgrounds also expressed fear of embarrassment and rejection. For them, particularly painful are the memories when these limitations came into public view.

I never wanted to really have more than other kids. The most fun we had was when me and my friends had about the same because nobody was envious then. (121, M)

I had no clue about our finances, but I knew I had it better than other children. This also made me feel like I needed to fit in with the other children. All the way up through high school I didn’t want people to think that I had more money because I guess in a small town that makes you a snob. So I generally would say I tried to keep my consumption on the level of everyone else. (018, F)

When I was younger, my mom did all the grocery shopping and always bought generic-the original kind w/ the white box and black writing—and that always made me feel insecure because all my friends had name brand cereal—and it made me feel like we were poorer than my friends—and made me embarrassed for my friends to look in the pantry. (153, F)

A range of economic circumstances are represented in our informants’ descriptions of their background and experiences. However, as children they were not always cognizant of the differences that existed among families. Neighborhoods and schools sometimes created geographic and economic boundaries, such that children only became aware of differences in their family’s wealth position when their circumstances changed. Many expressed a kind of awakening to their family’s financial position as they entered adolescence.

When I think about it now, my family was pretty well off, but I never realized it when I was younger. This had a lot to do with the fact that I went to a private school for kindergarten through high school. As I looked around everyone had pretty much everything they wanted without thinking about it twice. (058, F)

As a child, I did not have a lot of material things. I certainly had plenty of toys and such, but I didn’t have a lot. I think other kids my age that I played with had about the same amount, but that can be attributed to the neighborhood I grew up in. (063, F)

I didn’t realize until junior high, when by best friend had everything, how poor we really were. (010, F)

**Parents as Supporters of Social Acceptance**

How childhood experiences have been interpreted by these young adults appears to be driven more by the level of parental involvement and support they remember, than by the absolute level of household wealth they enjoyed. Our informants describe varying involvements of their parents, both as facilitators of peer acceptance and as teachers of consumer skills and preferences. Parental support was manifested in many different ways. Some parents were actively involved, and sympathetic to the social pressures that their children felt, while others expected their children to fend more for themselves. Levels of IG influences apparent today, appear to be linked to these early experiences.

Some parents tried to overtly facilitate their child’s social success by providing material goods that were similar to friends’ and classmates.’ Even if parents didn’t necessarily like the significance being placed on possessions, the desire to help their child fit in with peers seemed to outweigh hesitations they might have. In some cases, mothers and fathers did not agree between themselves that this was the best use of family resources, yet one parent would act as the primary facilitator. In contrast, other informants feel that their parents discounted the social pressures they encountered as a child, and this continues to influence their behavior today.
The only reason my mother bought us extra things and spent more than my dad wanted her to was because she knew we could afford it and she wanted us to have the things our friends had. (014, F)

My dad would prefer it if we put our money in the bank and never spent it, whereas although my mother was interested in encouraging us to save our money, she would still want us to have things that we wanted so that we wouldn’t be too different from other kids. (130, M)

I think that I grew up in a time where you had to be fashionable to be “cool.” My parents would grill me on why I needed the $60 Nike instead of the $20 Payless shoes that looked almost the same. I carry on this trend today in my daily spending. I still try to buy the best that my money can buy even though I don’t have much of it. (144, M)

Not surprisingly, our informants describe occasions when they were disappointed by the amount of money and material goods that their parents made available to them. Whether these disappointments later translate into a rejection of parental values seems to be more a function of the motives they attribute to their parents, than the amount of money and goods involved. Even when money was limited, if they believed that parents were not withholding resources they tended to accept their situation with gratitude, and are now more likely as young adults to adopt similar monetary perspectives. In these cases, informants recount being asked to contribute money for major purchases, and the important lessons they learned from doing so (even if painful at the time).

My parents did the best they could with the money they had. (006, M)

Growing up, when we were not as well off as we are now, I was taught early the benefits versus costs of extra unnecessary items such as fancy erasers and pencil sharpeners at school. In the end I wasn’t denied things that I wanted. I was just asked to think about it. So I can’t exactly place where, but somewhere some time we learned to spend very wisely from my parents. (154, F)

One thing that I appreciate from my upbringing is my parent’s example of a good work ethic. I have had a part-time job since I turned 16 and had to buy a car. My sister and I were both expected to purchase our own vehicles, and my parents covered the insurance. As my high school friends were getting new cars for their birthdays or a hand-be-down from older siblings, I thought my parents were the meanest in the world. Looking back, I took better care of my car than most of my friends did. (149, F)

Other respondents recount quite disparate experiences. Rather than feeling supported and encouraged by parents, these young adults expressed feelings of isolation and resentment. Some respondents believe that their parents didn’t trust them as children, and as a consequence deliberately withheld information. Others feel that their parents were simply unwilling to provide money or goods, though they clearly had the means to do so. Feelings of being left out, or unfairly criticized are also apparent. When expected to learn on their own, they report turning to peers for guidance.

I was insatiably curious about money back then but my parents said they couldn’t tell me how much they made cause I would run and tell my friends. This lack of trust to discuss money matters always bothered me and I’ve always wished they could be more open about money with me. Perhaps I would have developed a more frugal spending style if they had. I never truly learned the value of money in terms of saving for future needs. I didn’t even have my own savings account until late high school. Friends of mine were encouraged to put money into a saving’s account even as early as five years old. (124, F)

As a child, my parents weren’t ones to give me everything that I wanted. It was especially hard when all my friends would get it (e.g., a Cabbage Patch doll), and knowing that they had the money to afford it, but didn’t want to spoil me. (140, F)

My dad says that I am spoiled but I don’t think I am as spoiled as a lot of people I know. I hope that I don’t act like they do. (135, F)

My parents never really taught or told me anything about shopping that I really remember. I think I just went off on my own and did it. When I first started shopping my friends influenced me a lot. (176, F)

These characterizations of parent-child relationships reveal clear differences among families in the ways in which questions of independence and autonomy are negotiated. For some, the transition into adolescence and then into adulthood is marked by parental conflict or laissez faire attitudes. For others, warm, supportive relationships facilitate the acceptance of parental beliefs and values. This is largely consistent with the research findings on parental styles (e.g., Carlson and Grossbart 1988). Overall, it is apparent that the young adults in our study retain powerful feelings—both positive and negative—about their childhood experiences. These memories and their emotional connotations are now being carried forward into adulthood, and are helping to shape their self-identities.

Manifestations of IG Influences: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Evidence of continuing IG influence in our informants’ lives is readily apparent in the life histories. Many of the IG impacts observed in our study are related to savings and spending behavior. Generally, parents are viewed as positive role models and the primary source of input on financial management. This is consistent with early theorizing that parents influence the rational aspects of consumer learning (Riesman and Roseborough 1955). Peers also continue to serve as important benchmarks in young adulthood. However, by this point in their development social acceptance is not the driving issue. Rather, peers are a salient comparison against which they can assess their own financial management behavior. Though our informants report significant similarities to their parents, their friends and acquaintances also stimulate new opportunities and desires. Subtle tensions between these two sources of influence are evident.

I try to deposit as much of my money as possible and occasionally will spend money on a dinner or movie or a night out with friends. I think I spend a little less on clothes and other things. I hate to buy things that aren’t on sale. I think that is definitely one thing that I’ve gotten from my parents. The values that they have installed in me are saving your money and shopping
around. I do save more than most of my friends, but nowhere near as much as my parents. I think that would be hard. (052, F)

I am more like my parents than I am to my friends. When my friends and I go shopping, they buy anything and everything that is on sale, regardless if they need it. (111, F)

Parental influences are not always positive however. IG influences are sometimes associated with personal anxieties, poor decision making and dysfunctional behaviors (Moore and Wilkie 2005). Evidence of “dark side” IG influences is apparent in our data, particularly with regard to poor financial management, overspending and credit abuse. Poor financial management is an IG influence that may continue to create savings and spending problems for future generations (Hill 1970). These problem behaviors can be very painful to these individuals who are highly cognizant of the problems, yet may feel unequipped to resolve them.

My mother let me have a credit card when I was 17 years old. Most of my friends didn’t have one until they went to college. Looking back, it may have been a really young age to teach me about the buy now, pay later idea. That way of thinking has gotten me into a lot of trouble. (136, F)

As a child I was what many would consider “a spoiled brat.” Any new toy, game, sport, or pastime, I had to have it. And, I got it. I was the envy of most of my neighborhood friends. This feeling grew on me to my near demise. I now feel I must have the latest greatest in technology to get the same attention I once did. I was an only child, misunderstood by my peers because of my family being wealthy, most children were jealous and had little to do with me. So, the only way I could get attention from my peers was to have a cool toy. I soon learned that money and monetary items get people’s attention. And so I have since lived with my desire to buy and impress my friends who undoubtedly are quite sick of my toys, but I cannot quit buying. (027, M)

Overall, the manifestations of IG influences in our informants’ lives are rich and varied. Significant aspects of their savings and spending patterns, desires for material goods and financial management skills are grounded in their experiences growing up within their family households. Having moved out of the household, it is with friends and acquaintances that they now have the most frequent daily contact. As young adults, they are largely independent. They are in a position to either act on, or disregard what they have learned from their parents. To the extent that these influences are now embedded in their self-identities, they may be difficult to isolate. At the same time, peers introduce new ideas, preferences and approaches. In our final section, we consider how these may work to sustain or disrupt IG bonds.

Peers as Sustainers and Disruptors of IG Bonds

Although the influence of peers in the maintenance of IG impacts has not been investigated in depth, researchers have reported that these “new influencers” can have disruptive effects (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002). Our data suggests that peers may help to sustain IG bonds, as well as facilitate their disruption.

Disruptive Impacts. We observed situations in which peers are exerting influences that are in conflict with parental views. They may encourage or facilitate behavior that parents find not only less preferred, but also potentially objectionable. Although we should be careful to recognize the limitations of our research design, it is interesting to note that when our informants indicate they are engaging in behaviors that deviate from parents these are generally instances of “misbehavior”—primarily overspending, gambling, or overeating. They are well aware that their parents disapprove, and try to hide these activities from them. Though often motivated by simple pleasure seeking, over-consumption is sometimes used as a vehicle for rebellion. Thus, deeper family conflicts may surface in their consumption choices.

My bank account is still in my hometown therefore all of my money transactions have to go through them. This became a problem when I lost a little bit of money gambling on the riverboats this summer. It turns out that I really didn’t lose that much money but to my parents it was a lot. My dad could not understand how I could just throw my money away like that. I was just having fun with my friends. (144, M)

My parents would probably have a heart attack, (knock on wood) if they knew how much money I spend when I go out to the bars with my friends. (026, M)

I have trouble saving money, and that scares me for the future. It seems as though no matter how much I make, I manage to spend it all. My parents have always taught me to save money. I think that I learned from my friends. (139, F)

I think my father would be shocked and really upset if he knew how much I eat out. First because it’s so bad for you and second because it’s so expensive. My friends say that I’m just trying to rebel against them by eating out and eating so much junk food. (152, F)

Sustaining Impacts. We also observed many instances in which the influence of parents and peers are mutually reinforcing. Perhaps the most powerful way in which peers sustain IG influences, is by providing opportunities for these beliefs and attitudes to be enacted. IG impacts are now well-integrated into their identities, and become the norms for behavior. Although they acknowledge the roots of these beliefs in their parents’ model, they now view these as a natural and appropriate way to engage the world. Gift giving, shopping strategies and product preferences are all now reinforced and strengthened via their interactions with friends. The mechanism may be as simple as being the willing recipient of a gift, or more involved as in the shoe shopping ritual noted below.

I think that because I remember the activity so fondly from when it was a tradition with my mother, I enjoy it so much now. I admit that I have a thing for buying shoes. In fact, my best friend Nikki and I have sort of a competition going as to who has more pairs of shoes. At this point, I am at 56 pairs, while she has 59. We have discussed this and we figure that shoes can never look bad on you. (136, F)

I have also picked up lots of gift giving techniques from my parents. Pictures, making dinner for friends who have experienced a loss of a loved one, birthday gifts, etc. I love to give heartfelt gifts. Things that are important to me and can be symbolic. I also like to give things to people that they really want. (052, F)

My mom’s generous and supportive use of money has influenced me to do the same with my family and friends. (003, F)
It is funny how I am always in amazement with my boyfriend about his ridiculous purchases, just like my dad would be with my mom. (140, F)

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study highlights how IG influences are affected as peer groups begin to take on a more prominent role in young people’s lives. Although consumer researchers have often assumed that parental influence sharply declines in adolescence due to the countervailing influence of peer groups (e.g., Ward 1974), a richer and more varied picture emerges here. Peers serve as an important frame of reference beginning in childhood. They are used as a benchmark against which family wealth, spending patterns and lifestyle are assessed. IG influences were manifested in a number of ways related to financial management and material possessions in our study. Interestingly, the level of perceived parental support, not in terms of tangible resources, but on emotional dimensions emerged as the key sustaining force for IG influences. Peers also help to sustain IG, via shared shopping rituals and by providing venues in which to enact lessons learned at home. These findings extend conceptualizations that have tended to focus primarily on the disruptive impacts of “new influencers.”

Our findings are of course subject to the limitations of this study’s scope, sample and method. Nonetheless they are informative and potentially useful for future research. Because our study centered on IG influences related to financial well being and material goods, it is likely that the scope of peer influences in consumer settings is underrepresented here. Our substantive domain of interest focused on what might be considered the “rational aspects of consumption,” thus we would expect parental impacts to be particularly salient. Future research might be directed toward designs that capture the broader domain of peer influences, as well as potential interdependencies with IG impacts.

More generally, the significance of parental support (or the lack thereof) that was observed in this study seems to suggest a direction for future IG research studies. Greater understanding of the factors within the parent-child relationship that strengthen or weaken IG impacts would be useful. The literature on parental styles seems to offer a useful starting point for conceptualization (e.g., Carlson and Grosbart 1988). More broadly, it would seem that there is much to be learned about the interdependent actions of parents and peers in the consumer socialization process. The depth of insight provided by our informants reinforced for us the richness of this topic, and the potential for future advancements.

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