An Investigation of College Students’ Influence on Parents’ Innovation Adoption

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This study explored the influence of college students on their parents’ innovation adoption. This sort of upward intergenerational influence has been largely ignored in previous research, especially in the intergenerational influence and the innovation literature. Extending the models suggested by Gatignon and Robertson (1985) and Rogers (2003), and building on the ideas of family and innovation in Cotte and Wood (2004), we investigated the factors determining the conditions under which college students influence their parents’ innovation adoption.

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It has been twenty years since Gatignon and Robertson (1985) developed a model of the diffusion process. However, little research has been done in the context of a family’s adoption of innovation, especially Gatignon and Robertson’s unique focus on interpersonal communication transfer, one of the most important issues in diffusion research. Herein, we extended the intra-family influences on innovation literature with a study of college students’ influences on their parents’ innovation adoption.

Building on Cotte and Wood (2004), we suggested that influence within a family may be one important indicator of adoption probability. Prior family influence research has focused on intergenerational (parent to child) or intragenerational (sibling to sibling) influences in consumer socialization (Cotte and Wood 2004; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002). Intergenerational influence (IGI) research literature assumed that the direction of the influence on consumer behavior is from the older parent to the younger child (Moschis 1988). Comparatively little work has yet been explicitly done on upward intergenerational “influence”, i.e., the “influence” of children on parents, and none explicitly has considered the role of adult offspring as innovation “influences” on their parents. In Brooks’s (1957) seminal study, the difference between “influences” and “requests”, especially within the family, was discussed. For example, if a mother is asked by her child to buy a brand of coffee, it is considered the child’s “request”. If a mother is told by her child that a brand of coffee is good, and she takes her child’s words into consideration and is free to make the purchase, it is considered the child’s “influence”. Although the child’s “request” was the focus in most of the previous research (see John 1999), the child’s “influence” is the focus of this paper. “Influence” is defined as the power to affect somebody’s actions, character or beliefs, especially by providing examples for them to follow and winning their admiration (p.611), while “request” is defined as an act of asking for a thing in this way (p.996, Crowther 1995).

Most of the previous research involving children in a family has investigated the “request” of adolescents under the age of 18 in the family (see John 1999). As children become adults, they are often considered being more mature, knowledgeable, and trustworthy by parents. Potentially they may become opinion leaders and “influence” parents, rather than merely “request” purchase. An opinion leader is considered to have the distinguishing characteristic of being sought by others for information and advice regarding the field in which s/he is a leader (Brooks 1957; Gatignon and Robertson 1985; Childers 1986; Rogers 2003). At the college stage, most young adult children live with people other than family members. However, many college students are not totally independent and still need various kinds of support from parents. The frequent communication and interaction possibly lead to a potential channel for the innovation diffusion process to occur.

Methodology. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the influence of college students on their parents’ innovation adoption. In order to investigate further on the mechanism of innovation diffusion from college students to parents, we conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen college students at a large North American university. Based on the in-depth interviews, we conducted a survey with 119 college students, as well as 51 of their parents. Data from both college students and their parents were cross-validated and used in the data analyses. Logistic regression was used to examine factors related to whether college students have told parents on innovation and whether parents have adopted the innovation told by their children in the last six month.

Major Findings. We found that college students’ opinion leadership does not directly influence parents’ innovation adoption. Rather, college students’ opinion leadership influences parents’ product category knowledge, which subsequently influences parents’ innovation adoption.

We also found that the relationship between parents’ product category knowledge and their innovation adoption is moderated by the innovativeness of the innovation such that the higher the parents’ knowledge, the more likely their adoption, regardless of the innovativeness of the innovation, whereas when parents have lower knowledge, they are much more likely to adopt low innovative innovation than high innovative innovation.

According to the innovation diffusion literature, both homophily (i.e., the degree of similarity between pairs of individuals) and heterophily (i.e., the degree of dissimilarity) are important in determining the innovation diffusion (Rogers 2003). We only found the effects of homophily in social value, which indicated that the more similar the social value between college students and parents, the more likely that the college students tell parents about innovations and the more likely that their parents adopt the innovations.

Finally, Ekstrom, Tansuhaj and Foxman (1987) found that children’s influence varies by family communication pattern and thus is stronger in families high in concept-orientation (i.e., children are encouraged to develop their own ideas and express their views more openly, see also McLeod and Chaffee 1972). We found that college students in more concept-oriented families are more likely to tell parents about innovations, but have no more influence on parents’ innovation adoption than those in less concept-oriented families. On the other hand, emotional closeness between college students and parents does not influence whether college students tell parents about innovations, but influence parents’ adoption, such that the higher the emotional closeness, the more likely the parents’ adoption.

References