The Intersubjectivity of Family Consumption: Intra-Family Consumer Identity and the Family Scape

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This study of everyday consumption is based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted among four Danish middle-class families in Copenhagen, from which an illustrative example of family car purchase is drawn. By introducing two new concepts to the study of family consumption; intra-family consumer identity and family scape, I analyze how family members negotiate purchase decisions, and relate to each other’s preferences and desires, as well as those of other families. I consider how family members’ interrelations as consumers and long-term negotiations over symbolic meanings of consumption are formed by social normativities and structures which they both resist and draw upon.

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The Intersubjectivity of Family Consumption: Intra-family Consumer Identity and the Family Scape

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This paper is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork among four Danish middle-class families in Copenhagen. It is a phenomenological account of how consumption constitutes the intersubjectivity of family life, interpreting a detailed case of one family’s car ownership and purchase. This family used to drive a Volvo that long-term ownership had sacralized and decommodified (McCracken 1986; Belk, Wallendorf et al. 1989). The purchase of a new Ford marks a sea change in their constellation of individual identities, family identity and brand meanings. I use the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity as a lens through which I analyze this process (Schutz 1970; Jackson 1996, 1998), and suggest two concepts for the analysis of family consumption: Intra-family consumer identity and family scape.

The paper contributes to uncovering the dynamics of consumer identity projects, and how the structures and normative views of society influence consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005), as well as collective, long-term, narratively embedded forms of consumption rather than individual, isolated acts (Fournier 1998; Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn 2001). I consider ways that the different family members exert individual agency as they negotiate their way towards a purchase decision balancing individual desires and collective needs. However, the paper is not focused on the modeling of collective decision-making and individual influences that has been a major preoccupation of family consumption research. Rather, the paper contributes to current research that aims to conceptualize the participatory roles of consumption objects and activities in fluid, multi-layered processes of family identity enactment (Epp and Price 2008), adding to this research a focus on intra-family negotiations and inter-family processes of identity construction through consumption.

I find the term intersubjectivity of consumption suggestive for describing the ongoing give and take of intra-family consumer relations, and how family consumption becomes meaningful in the context of a wider social network of families who evaluate each other’s consumption practices and identities. To this end I present a detailed analysis of how family members both contest and resonate with each other’s consumer desires and preferences. I emphasize that even in the “sacred” sphere of home and family life, access to which consumers often deny market messages (Coupland, Iacobucci et al. 2005), family members know each other as consumers. Each family member has a set of desires, preferences and values whereby other family members know him or her. I suggest the concept of intra-family consumer identity: An individual set of dispositions—changing over time—for certain practices of consumption, ownership and disposition that present our fellow family members with a window upon our needs, desires, values and fears, and thus a potential for collective or dyadic bonding and empathy, but also challenge them with potential transgressions and dominations of their lifeworld. In families as in wider consumer society, having desires is seen as a positive human trait, but can also as a potential disposition towards excess that collide with the surrounding social world (Belk, Ger et al. 2003). I outline a family-specific dynamic of mutual social knowledge about each other’s everyday consumption patterns and desires, in which empathy and conflict coexist as intersubjective fundamentals of family consumption.

The concept of intra-family consumer identity allows for my observation that family members draw different meanings from the same consumption objects, but also that they are aware of the meanings perceived by their fellow family members. I argue that in order to conceptualize more fully family consumption, we must consider intra-familial diversity of interpretation, as well as conflicts. The temporal perspective is also important: in being less voluntary and fluid than brand communities, and involving long-term (even multi-generational; (Price, Arnould et al. 2000) interactions across a wide range of consumption categories, the dynamics of family consumption differ from other consumption communities.

The last aspect to this analysis is how family consumption connects to society and social networks. The normativities and classifications of wider society impinge on family consumption in several ways documented by this paper: The moralized opposition between consumer restraint and excess, or between thrift and “the treat” (Miller 1998), repeat themselves in a fractal-like manner at each level from inter-family social distinctions to the gendered interactions of intra-family consumer identities, and at the individual level in the ongoing moral self-reflexivity of the individual consumer. Intra- and inter-familial consumer identities thus mirror the discourses and ideologies of the marketplace (Kozinets 2008). Another structuring force influencing family consumption, which has also been suggested by other family consumption researchers, is the “familial gaze” of families observing and critically evaluating each other lifestyle (Epp and Price 2008). My paper shows the existence of a heavily moralized model for how a family ought to consume, one which sanctifies authenticity and hard earned rewards (such as home cooking or physically demanding family trips to the Norwegian mountains) while denigrating convenience (take away food or package tours to Tenerife). And just like the gaze of “absent others” is internalized and present in how people organize their material home (Miller 2002), the intra-family consumer identities simultaneously face inward towards the family sphere, as they are actualized in interaction with other family members, and outward towards the symbolic, libidinous and moral structures of the consumer culture, which they both resist and draw upon.

I suggest the concept of the family scape to denote this complex of meanings that structure family consumption, while also being appropriated by the family in its ongoing construction of identity. This scape is a general cultural model, transmitted partly through marketing, of what a family is and is not, and what being a family means in consumption terms. In several variations, the concept of the scape has shown its potential for consumer research and social science in theorizing how overarching structural codes and commonalities shape and constric local communities, groups and individuals, who are thereby also empowered with a means for communicating identity and exercising agency (Billig 1995; Wilk 1995; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006).