The Impact of Family Micro-Environments on Children's Consumer Socialization

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We examine children’s consumption experiences within families in order to further investigate the role that the family environment plays in the consumer socialization of children. We identify how familial micro-environments, created by parents and siblings, work to create consumer micro-environments that exert differential types of influence on children’s socialization as consumers. An updated conceptualization of consumer socialization is presented, which recognizes that children inhabit their own unique niche in the ecology of their family. A child’s unique familial micro-environment affects how influence is exerted in decision making in families, and the resistance children experience to their influence strategies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the family environment in which children learn to become consumers. It aims to contribute towards filling the significant gaps which exist in our current understanding of the role that the family environment plays in the socialization of children (Roedder John, 1999). This paper also offers support for Cotte and Wood’s (2004) assertion that parents can create different family environments for their children, and explores the possible implications of such environments in terms of consumer socialization.

With the family described as the socialisation unit (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), it is perhaps surprising that relatively little is known about how such a social environment impacts on the consumer socialization process. Moschis and Churchill (1978), too, point towards the importance of the family in the consumer socialization process, and Moschis and Churchill (1978) offer their classic conceptualization of consumer socialization.

Theories such as parental socialisation style (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988) and family communication pattern (Carlson et al., 1994) have been presented which aim to shed greater light on the family socialization environment. However, such theories have failed to adopt an internal focus. Instead, families are often compared to one another, and consumer research has ignored the possible differences which may exist within the same family.

Research in the fields of genetics and behavioural psychology suggest that multiple environments, or familial micro-environments (Harris, 1995), exist within the same family. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the family environment in greater detail in relation to the consumer socialization of children. A wide variety of family forms were chosen as the sites of consumption due to marketing’s preoccupation with nuclear family types (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), and the voices of children alongside adults are actively sought.

Six families were recruited to participate; one lesbian headed family with both adopted and biological children; one blended family; a family headed by a cohabiting couple; a family headed by a single mother; and two nuclear families. Each family member was invited to take part in the research process in a move away from the child to discuss consumption related issues, and thus the ability to acquire consumer skills.

The unique familial environments fostered by parents (paternal micro-environments) and children (fraternal micro-environments) impact the consumer socialization environment in families, and the antecedent variables and socialization process variables which Moschis and Churchill (1978) identify, and thus the learning outcomes for children within families. A child’s familial micro-environment affects the opportunities which are made available to the child to discuss consumption related issues, and thus the ability to acquire consumer skills.

REFERENCES


EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The modern practice of recreational hunting is a domain that has been understudied in the sociological and anthropological literature and completely neglected in the consumer research literature. Anthropology has largely focused on the history of hunting as interpreted via modern day hunter-gatherer societies as a means of studying human development, while sociology has focused on the extremities of the hunting culture such as poaching or on the ethics of hunting or eating meat. The neglect in consumer research is particularly surprising for two reasons. First, hunting in pre-historic times represents the earliest representation of key consumption and acquisition activities. While today we shop, previously we hunted. And activities such as sharing meat that continue to exist today, both among modern hunters and among still-existing hunter-gatherer societies, suggest remnants of one of the earliest forms of exchange. Second, hunting is an area in which study of the extended consumer socialization process in families—typically between fathers and their sons—can be examined. New hunters, along with their male mentors, undergo a years- or decades-long process of socialization into the skills, social norms, and values of the hunting culture. This socialization process, along with the ensuing expression of masculinity by hunters, is the focus of this study.

Children develop through both cognitive and social means and both have been suggested as important foci for the study of consumer socialization (Moschis and Moore 1979; Roedder John 1999). In consumer research, however, the cognitive development of socialization has attracted the most attention. In this stream of literature, socialization is envisioned as progressing through a series of three stages that are related to the child’s age (Roedder John 1999): a perceptual stage focused toward “immediate and readily observable perceptual features of the marketplace” (186), an abstract analytic stage where the child shifts to more symbolic thought where s/he can see multiple perspectives, and a reflective stage in which the child is able to grasp not only functional meanings of the consumption experience but also its more subtle social meanings. This approach sees the child attaining specific skills at universal stages with this progression depending on the complexity of the child’s existing cognitive structures and is based on theory developed originally by Jean Piaget (1963). In contrast to this Piagetian perspective, we find that an explanation that explicitly includes the influence of family members and other mentors more richly explains the socialization process into hunting.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews of approximately two hours with twenty-seven adult male hunters and a wildlife manager, including interviewing separately 5 fathers and sons who hunt. The secondary method was participant observation of the hunting community, including hunter safety classes, hunting and gun shows, informal interviews with hunting-related retailers, and participation in hunting trips. A hermeneutical analysis of the text was conducted, based on the assumption that consumers’ personal histories are embedded within a context of personal meanings expressed by “culturally shared narrative forms” (Thompson 1997, 439-40), involving an intra-textual analysis resulting in a written interpretation of each informant and an inter-textual analysis comparing themes across informants.

Our findings suggest that consumer socialization can be conceptually expanded to include the dynamics by which social influences such as family impact the process through which young men learn to hunt, making use of Lev Vygotsky’s theory of development (Vygotsky 1978; Tudge and Scrimsher 2003) that stresses the importance of interpersonal interaction in the socialization process. Hunters progress through four distinct stages that are characterized by support, challenge, and encouragement by their mentors. Pre-hunters accompany their mentors hunting, participating in scouting and retrieving activities, while neophytes have proven they are responsible enough to carry a loaded gun. Apprentice hunters hunt independently without their mentors, exhibiting camaraderie and challenge with their peers, and competent hunters have moved past the need to prove themselves and have achieved actualization of their masculinity in ways discussed in the following section.

Competent hunters negotiate masculinity in ways that relate both to the mediating role that equipment plays in constructions of the “extended self” (Belk 1988) and to the primary motivation achieved from participating in the activity of hunting. Their equipment meanings vary on a continuum between meanings that are intrinsic to the equipment (e.g., accuracy, technical aspects) and meanings that are extrinsic to the equipment (e.g., personal history, nostalgia). The second factor relates to the approach to the hunt, which varies from a focus on the experience of the hunt (a process orientation) to a focus on the final kill (an ends orientation).

Thus, four subgroups of hunters emerged: traditionalists, gearheads, experientialists, and transcendentalists, and we found that masculinity is both expressed and understood differently by the four types of hunters. For traditionalists, hunting is deeply intertwined with rural family traditions and results in easily achieved close male social bonds. Technology mediates the hunting experience for the gearhead through mastery of equipment in both skill development and customization, he expresses his masculinity through his desire for control, order, precision, and accuracy, and is unique among hunters in his focus on a hierarchy based on technical expertise. Masculinity for the experiential hunter harkens back to finding his particular place in both the natural and the social worlds. Rather than dominating nature, the experiential is interconnected with nature. Transcendental hunters represent a category of masculinity that affirms emotional bonds to both family and nature by using their family socialization and life long hunting experience to achieve a balance between stereotypically feminine characteristics of empathy and caring and a stereotypically masculine activity of hunting and killing in competition with other men.

REFERENCES