Helping Or Hindering?: the Ambivalent Role of Siblings As Socialization Agents Within Family Consumption

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We examine sibling relationships and how such relationships shape consumer socialization of children. Using in-depth interviews with twenty-nine family informants, we find that sibling relationships are often ambivalent and volatile. Consumption choices (e.g., brand selection) are often shaped by siblings who are filters, as well as sources, for market-place information.

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Using depth interviews, we uncover the ambivalent role that adult siblings play in shaping the consumption experiences of individuals. We then link these individual experiences to the role of consumption in family transitions, and the ways in which family identity both guides and challenges choice and use of elder care. We find that individuals hold unique sets of preferences (e.g., interpretation of what is best for the parent), involvement (e.g., willingness to participate in the decision process), and resources (e.g., time, money) in regard to their parents’ need for elder care. When siblings combine their unique perspectives to make a family decision, discrepancies amplify the stress for each individual and for the family as a whole. Interestingly, however, the existence of siblings also seems to facilitate coping with the stress. Siblings, then, play an ambivalent role by both generating and tempering the stress associated with choosing long-term commercial elder care for a parent. The ultimate choice is further shaped by the underlying family dynamics, family identity, and the interplay between siblings. We compare and contrast the experiences of adult siblings with only children in this context, and find further support for our model; when an adult child has no siblings, decision making appears to be less complicated but the ongoing consumption appears to be more emotionally burdensome.

This research contributes to our understanding of family decision-making, the dynamic and sometimes volatile nature of sibling relationships in the family consumption process, and the ways in which family identity can both challenge and facilitate consumption. Our unit of analysis is the relational group of adult siblings, which is a novel perspective in consumer research.

Helping or Hindering? The Ambivalent Role of Siblings as Socialization Agents within Family Consumption

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sibling relationships have been largely overlooked within existing consumer research into the role of the family within consumer socialization (Cotte and Wood, 2004). The family has been represented as the most important consumption unit (Commuri and Gentry 2000) because it plays a significant role in the consumer socialization of children (John, 1999). So far, research attention has largely focussed on the role of parents in socializing their children into being consumers. Current research has explored the socialization styles of parents (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988) or the communication patterns that parents adopt (Carlson, Walsh, Lacznak and Grossbart, 1994) in facilitating the acquisition of consumption knowledge for children. In contrast the role that siblings may play in teaching one another consumption skills has been relatively neglected (Cotte and Wood, 2004). In this paper we specifically explore the role that siblings play within the context of consumer socialization. We focus on understanding sibling relationships (‘sibship’) and how such relationships, as one component of the family environment, shape the consumer socialization of children.

A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with six families in our exploratory study, capturing the stories of twenty-nine family informants. Following calls for family research that capture the dynamics of family life (Hamilton and Catterall 2006; Tinson and Nancarrow 2005) interviews were conducted with both children and their parents. Consent was sought from parents and guardians to approach their children in order to then seek the children’s consent to be involved in the data collection process (Mandell 1991). Methods by which valid consent can be obtained from children were adhered to (Mason 2004). The interviews were conducted in the family home, usually in the kitchen at the dining table. Each family was visited between three and five times and interviews were conducted over a period ranging from four to twelve months. The interviews with family members were conducted in three stages and explored themes such as family history, intra-family coalitions and how family members got their own way.

Our exploratory study highlights that sibling relationships were far from static, and were often ambivalent and volatile in nature. Our family stories show how the siblings discussed consumption issues with each other. Siblings were often children’s first point of contact when considering consumption issues and choices. This is significant as the children studied suggested that they would rather lose face with their siblings, who appeared to veto selected brands and products, before they ran the risk of losing face with their peers. In this case, the family provided a safe and private environment in which to seek and update their consumer knowledge about products and brands. Consumption choices, and in particular brand selection, were often shaped by siblings who were important filters, as well as sources, for market-place information.

However, given the ambivalent nature of sibling relationships each child did not have equal access to this consumption advice or approval process. We identify both supportive/co-operative and hostile/aggressive dimensions of sibling relationships. Such relationship types had implications in terms of the consumption and consumer socialization of the children studied. Where relationships were supportive siblings would lend each other help in influencing their parents to buy them products, with siblings openly discussing consumption issues and brand choices with one another. Where relationships were hostile and aggressive such information and advice sharing was not apparent, but rather siblings would deliberately withhold their opinions or consumption help, or offer incorrect opinions in the hope that this would subsequently tarnish their brother/sister’s image and reputation with their peers. As such although siblings had the potential to be important socialization agents for children, unlike the socializing actions of parents the children studied did not always have good and constructive consumer socialization intentions in mind.

Intergenerational Transfer of Consumption Practices within Families

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Our research examines intergenerational transfers of consumption practices (ITCP). We recognize ITCPs as socially embedded in the consumption practices of families which contain multiple and sometimes conflicting identity projects across units of analysis (the individual, intra-family coalitions and the family collective). Through in-depth interviews with sixteen members of five families, we examine this complex interplay of identity projects in a given ITCP and demonstrate how identity interplay affects synergy and discord within the transfers.

Our investigation departs from prior research in three key ways. First, we examine consumption practices rather than special objects and brand preferences. Consumption practices are central to creating, sustaining and passing forward individual and collective identity (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007; Warde 2005). However, prior research has focused on the transfer of special objects, heirlooms (Belk 1988; Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), brand preferences (Cotte and Wood 2004; Fournier 1998; Hoyer 1984; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002), and wealth (Brandford 2009) without much consideration of the practices that surround them and within which objects and brand preferences are implicitly embedded. The foregrounding of objects and brand preferences is useful in understanding how their meanings are transferred