Consumer Ambivalence in Intergenerational Settings

Katerina Karanika, University of Exeter, UK
Margaret Hogg, Lancaster University, UK

Consumer studies have tended to neglect the role of ambivalence in family sharing and intergenerational relationships. A phenomenological study with downwardly mobile consumers involved in familial intergenerational support/sharing identified three types of consumer ambivalence which reflected different types of conflicts between consumption choices and different levels of family identity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer studies have largely neglected the role of ambivalence (Ottes et al., 1997) in family sharing and intergenerational relationships (e.g., Belk, 2007/2010; Belk & Llamas, 2012). Consumer research presented either a more positive view (e.g., Cappellini et al., 2014; Hamilton, 2009; Kochuyt, 2004; Göte et al., 2009; Hogg et al., 2004) or a bleak view of the family (e.g., Hill, 1991; Hill & Gaines, 2007) coping with financial adversities. These somewhat polarized views of the family potentially minimize the diversity of family experience, neglect that sharing can be difficult (Belk 2007/2010; Belk & Llamas, 2012) and overlook ambivalent feelings in family sharing. The sociological concept of intergenerational ambivalence (that often accompanies adult intergenerational support and sharing) offers a more nuanced view of family life that moves beyond the two traditional oppositional standpoints of love, solidarity, and consensus, versus conflict, abuse, and neglect, when exploring consumers’ experiences (e.g., Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998).

Consumer research has tended to concentrate on the nuclear family (e.g., Epp & Price, 2008/2010; Thompson, 1996) and has overlooked the experience of adult intergenerational support and sharing. Nevertheless, intergenerational sharing is widespread. Globally, a significant number of adult children move back into or remain in their parental homes or receive parental financial support; grandparents become alloparents of their grandchildren; adults live with or provide financial or practical aid to aging parents (e.g., Bengtson, 2001; Choroszewicz & Wolff, 2010; ONS, 2014). Adult intergenerational sharing may be experienced differently from the taken-for-granted, obligatory sharing within families with underage children where demand sharing takes place as a matter of entitlement and on which consumer research has largely concentrated. Intergenerational support and intergenerational sharing can be breeding grounds for ambivalence in family relationships and in consumption. This is because intergenerational support and sharing can be associated not only with affection, compassion for others and mutual aid, but also with failed expectations and ideals for adult children achieving financial independence, the sacrifice of autonomy, conformity pressures, and the desire to dominate and exercise control (e.g., Lüscher 2011; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Willson et al., 2003).

This paper uses the experiences of downwardly mobile consumers faced with financial difficulties in order to explore ambivalence, intergenerational support and family sharing. A phenomenological study was conducted with Greek downwardly mobile consumers coping with financial difficulties and consumption restrictions and being involved in familial intergenerational support and sharing. Phenomenological interviewing (Kvale, 1983; Thompson et al., 1989/1990) was used to elicit full descriptions of experiences and a phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis (Thompson et al., 1989/1990) was followed using a back-and-forth, part-to-whole interpretation mode.

Intergenerational ambivalence accompanied intergenerational support and was the lens through which these downwardly mobile consumers experienced consumption. The findings reveal three types of consumer ambivalence (e.g., Ottes et al., 1997) in family sharing. The first type of consumption ambivalence was experienced for goods that prioritized individual over relational and collective identity. In this case, participants were involved in guilt-evoking or shame-evoking consumption of goods considered as ‘reflectors of egoism’. This type of consumer ambivalence was accompanied by doubts about the purchase and the continuation of the consumption that were often addressed by reducing the use of or sharing the possession in an effort to pursue voluntary simplicity. Participants tried to avoid the market for ‘reflector of egoism’ goods in order to avoid ‘temptations’, but they also often engaged in extensive market search regarding these goods.

The second type of consumer ambivalence was experienced for goods that partly supported but mainly burdened individual, relational and collective identity. In this case, participants were involved in regretful consumption and experienced some goods as ‘burdens’. This type of consumer ambivalence was accompanied by remorse for the purchase that was often addressed also by reducing the use of or sharing the possession or by researching the market and trying to sell the possession in an effort to pursue voluntary simplicity.

The third type of ambivalence was experienced for consumption that prioritized relational or collective over individual identity. Here participants engaged in involuntary simplicity by accepting ‘compromises’ and giving up possessions which represented ‘self-extensions’. This type of consumer ambivalence was not accompanied by doubts about the continuation of the behavior and the consumption but rather it was accompanied by efforts to accept consumption simplicity. To this end, participants avoided the market for ‘lost self-extensions’ goods and engaged in extensive market search to find the best ‘compromise’ goods possible. An internal locus of control facilitated the acceptance of both ‘compromises’ and losses.

This paper brings together three major consumer research concepts i.e., ambivalence (Ottes et al., 1997), sharing (Belk, 2007/2010) and family identity (Epp & Price, 2008/2010) and family identity (Epp & Price, 2008/2010), considered within the neglected context of familial adult intergenerational support. In doing so, the paper extends previous work in the following ways.

It identifies three types of consumer ambivalence which reflected different types of conflicts between consumption choices and different levels of family identity (collective, relational and individual; Epp & Price, 2008). The study problematizes previously somewhat polarized (i.e., positive versus bleak) views of the family in consumer research. The paper also adds to previous work that had explored different antecedents of consumer ambivalence (Ottes et al., 1997) by highlighting family sharing and particularly adult intergenerational support in situations of economic adversity, as a major antecedent of consumer ambivalence. Finally, the paper proposes a typology of coping strategies aligned along a practical/emotional continuum.

Future research can explore ambivalence and family sharing in different family structures and during different family transitions. Also, future research can investigate how the findings resonate in societies with stronger welfare states and societies less affected by austerity measures (e.g., the UK) that nevertheless experience a significant rise in intergenerational support (Choroszewicz & Wolff, 2010; ONS, 2014).

Finally, the study can be of value to marketing managers and policy makers who need to understand the feelings of ambivalence that accompany intergenerational support and how these color consumption experiences, and use this understanding in product and communication strategies or in interventions at societal, family and individual levels.
REFERENCES