

Family identity: an essential lens to understand family consumption

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Abstract:

Family has a tremendous impact on consumer decision, often long after consumers have left the family nest. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to review research on family consumption and propose a research agenda on this topic. The authors show how the approach of family consumption has evolved from an individualistic to an identity perspective, and they advocate for the use of the lens of family identity. The research agenda presents how this approach can enlighten three major trends that strongly affect today's consumer behavior, namely sustainability, society liquidity and digitalization.

Keywords: *Family identity, collective consumption.*

Introduction

Family has considerable implications in terms of consumer behavior (Price 2008). It transmits an identity that influences, consciously or not, individual consumption decisions (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000); it acts as a major organizing force that shapes the consumption behaviors and experiences of members in the marketplace (Epp and Thomas 2018); it lies at the heart of the way individuals learn to be consumers (Miller 1998) and provides a place for intergenerational influences in consumption (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004).

This importance of family in consumer behavior leads many researchers to consider that a comprehensive understanding of family consumption is necessary to grasp consumers in all their complexity (Price et al. 2000). Consequently, this article seeks to provide an overall picture of previous research on family consumption and build a conceptual framework showing how a better understanding of family consumption can contribute to the consumer behavior research agenda. First, we review the different approaches used to apprehend family consumption. Second, we propose an agenda for future research that conceptualizes how using the family identity lens can contribute to a better understanding of current major trends such as sustainability or digitalization.

Conceptualization of family consumption: from a collective decision-making process to the building of a collective shared identity

Family as a set of individuals making collective decisions

Traditionally, research on family consumption has been mainly based on an individualistic approach, which considers family as a sum of individual agents. Scholars in this stream therefore investigate the respective individual roles of each family member in the collective decision-making process related to consumption. They mainly focus on issues such as how the participation of family members varies according to the different stages of the decision-making process (Ferber and Lee 1974) and how individuals negotiate within the family (Commuri and Gentry 2005). They also examine the way family members influence one another (Cotte and Wood 2004) and modify their decisions to accommodate family concerns (Hamilton and Biehal 2005). The potential conflicts that may result from these processes have also been a topic of interest (Seymour and Lessne 1984). Literature on family consumption has traditionally focused on the couple (Davis and Rigaux 1974), but children have increasingly been taken into consideration (Darley and Lim 1986).

Family as a collectivity made of interplaying identity bundles

In reaction to this vision of family, another approach has emerged, referred to as the "identity stream". Partisans of this alternative stream criticize traditional literature for conceptualizing family as an aggregate of distinct individuals with well-defined roles, instead of considering it as a global system (Epp and Price 2008), and for not taking identity issues into account when studying family consumption. They believe that this lack of consideration for truly collective enterprises within the family unit leads companies to make inappropriate decisions, solely based on individual family members' decision roles and relative influence, without taking into account the significant influence that the other identity bundles within the family exert on collective decisions, nor the fact that families use market resources to achieve relational and family identity goals.

Defined as "the gestalt of qualities and attributes that make it a particular family and that differentiate it from other families" (Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity 1988, 212), family identity is mutually constructed, both internally among family members, and externally with respect to the perceptions that external members have of the family (Reiss 1981). It is characterized by its components: structure (the limits of family membership and the hierarchy and roles of different family members), generational orientation (the links between generations and how the family

preserves its identity from generation to generation) and character (the characteristics of the family daily life, such as shared activities, or common tastes and values).

Epp and Price (2008) propose a conceptualization of family identity that take family as the unit of observation and considers the latter not as a collection of individuals, but as “a collectivity that is further comprised of bundles of relationships each with distinctive identities, discourses, rituals, symbols, and experiences that are enacted as complementary, overlapping, and competing consumption practices” (Epp 2008, 5). This framework helps conceptualize how families adapt their consumption strategies to manage the identity interplay between these different bundles, relying in this end on market resources (products, brands and services) and various communication forms (rituals, narratives, social dramas, intergenerational transfers and everyday interactions).

A prolific family identity literature

By changing how to study the goals underlying collective consumption, this framework has opened up an entire field of research studying family consumption through the lens of family identity. Most of these studies focus on the negotiation of family identity through the consumption of everyday activities, as identity negotiations in the family unit are said to occur mostly in the mundanity of the daily life (Edirisingha, Ferguson, and Aitken 2015). In this regard, a vast body of research focuses on family meals consumption (Cappellini and Parsons 2012; Epp and Price 2018).

Other activities of the daily life, such as TV viewing, are also investigated; in this regard, Chitakunye and Maclaran (2014) show that television is a site of formation and negotiation of identities within the family, mediating relationships and becoming part of the everyday practices of family life. Consumption objects (Limerat 2013), brands (Billon 2017) and vacations (Epp and Price 2011) are also examined. Some studies look at less ordinary consumption contexts, such as high-involvement purchase decisions (Lien et al. 2018), determining care solutions for ageing parents (Dean, Kellie, and Mould 2014), consumption choices during “transition phases” associated to forced migration (Alhanouti 2020), or long-distance consumption (Epp, Schau, and Price 2014).

Call for a consumer research agenda using the family identity approach

The vision of family as a collective identity building has brought significant new contributions in the consumer behavior field. However, many important consumption trends have not been the object of studies from this angle yet. We believe that, at a time where family is being strongly impacted by various societal trends, additional research is needed to better understand these trends and their consequences for family consumption. Therefore, in the next part of this paper, we present a research agenda covering three topical contemporary trends that come to disrupt the family unit: sustainability, liquidity and digitalization. We argue that it is relevant to use the lens of family identity to better understand these major trends and how they disrupt family consumption.

Family identity and sustainability

Defined as a development model allowing to meet societies’ present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their owns (WCED 1987), sustainability calls for a total rethinking of many aspects of consumption (White, Hardisty, and Habib 2019). Family has been shown to be an influencing force in this regard (Collins 2015). We suggest that the identity approach can be particularly relevant for understanding how families can adopt more sustainable consumption practices.

A key component of family identity is the character, representing the common tastes, values, and activities that shape family daily life. In practice, many opportunities can be used to influence family character toward an identity that would englobe sustainability as a core value.

For instance, sensibilization actions at school can make children convince their parents to implement new recycling or energy-saving practices at home; the myriad of books on how to become “a zero-waste family” can resonate in parents’ minds to change daily routines and organizations. We suggest that research should focus on the most efficient ways of inducing families to build shared environmentally-oriented narratives that would durably shape a sustainable consumption behavior.

Second, the adoption of daily sustainable practices requires the deep understanding by consumers that the living conditions of future generations depends on their present behavior. This relates to the second component of family identity, generational orientation, representing how families refer to past generations and integrate future ones in the building of their identity. A more concrete understanding of what the future generations will have to endure if we do not play our part is considered as one of the most powerful potential driver toward the immediate adoption of more sustainable practices; research should therefore focus on this issue.

Family identity and liquidity

In recent years, scholars have evidenced the progressive transition from a solid to a liquid society (Bauman 2000). This “liquidity” manifests in many aspects of our societies: the profiles of the world biggest firms switch from traditional industrial empires to agile digital platforms, job markets become more precarious and flexible, and many scholars observe a weakening of institutions and relationships (Jay 2010). Regarding consumption, liquidity is characterized among other things by an increased preference for temporary access to goods rather than long-lasting possession (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) or by more volatile consumer identities that lead to lower consumer loyalty to brands.

Family identities are not exempt from this trend. With liquidity, old social structures gradually break down. While marriage has long been considered an immutable foundation of society, liquidity makes it more unstable and less durable, leading to an increase in divorce and blended families. This change in family structure, one of the main pillars of family identity, operates a redistribution of family roles (Costa 2013). It also makes family boundaries become more malleable. The increasing inclusion of new members favors the adoption of shared values and activities and the rejection of installed family norms in favor of new ones. Moreover, with the decline in possession in favor of mere access, there is a decline in use of consumption by family to preserve the continuity of their family identity through generations (Limerat 2013).

Therefore, we suggest that the lens of family identity could be particularly useful to understand the major changes brought about by liquidity.

Family identity and digitalization

Digitalization is characterized by the dematerialization of products and services, the ubiquity of consumption that allows consumers to buy anything from anywhere at any time, or the convergence of devices that allows consumers to use one unique device (e.g., phones) for multiple activities (make phone calls but also watch TV programs, browse on the Internet, take photo and video, or play video games) (Belk 2013; Jenkins 2006). This involves many major changes for family consumption and identity that are yet to be investigated by research.

For instance, digitalization completely transforms the role of television in the way family structure and define themselves. While television used to organize the daily family routines and rituals and gathering family members in the living room, digitalization now allows family members to watch the TV programs of their choice, whenever and wherever they want, individually or collectively. While it sometimes represents a factor of distancing between members, it can also contribute to maintain some family bonding rituals such as remote Netflix parties (Epp et al. 2014). Moreover, digitalization has also reduced everyday interactions between the different generations of the family (de Singly 2017), consequently weakening generational orientation and family identity continuity. Indeed, digitalization weakens shared references

between generations and contributes to assigning to each generation its own consumption practices and values.

The family identity lens thus appears also useful to understand the significant changes that digitalization has engendered. Examining how digitalization is transforming the way families use consumption to negotiate and enact their identity thus appears crucial.

Discussion

This article aims to advocate for a research agenda that investigates family consumption through the prism of family identity as defined by Epp and Price (2008). We show how the understanding of some major current trends, such as sustainability, liquidity and digitalization, could benefit from studies using this approach.

As openings on future research areas, we suggest that future research should not limit to the family unit. For instance, regarding sustainability, the development of a collective identity oriented toward sustainability at broader levels, such as local communities, companies, cities and even countries, can contribute to transform practices on a larger scale. There are important research opportunities on questions such as how to foster a sense of belonging within a geographic community to encourage local consumption, or how to develop citizens' generational orientation in order to implement immediate changes that will preserve future generations' needs.

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