Parental responsiveness and adolescent susceptibility to peer influence: A cross-cultural investigation ☆

Zhiyong Yang [a,*], Michel Laroche [b]

[a] Department of Marketing, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX 76019, United States
[b] John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada H3G 1M8

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ABSTRACT

From a developmental perspective, this research focuses on how parental responsiveness affects adolescent susceptibility to peer influence both directly, and indirectly, through the key elements of adolescent self-concept (i.e., interdependent self-construal, self-esteem, and self-monitoring). The proposed parent-self-peer model incorporates culture as a moderator. The overarching finding is that in individualist cultures such as Canada, responsiveness reduces susceptibility mainly through an indirect effect by undermining interdependent self-construal, fostering self-esteem, and impairing self-monitoring. However, in collectivist cultures such as China, responsive parenting reduces susceptibility primarily through a direct effect. These findings are largely due to the cultural differences in socialization goals oriented toward individualism vs. collectivism.

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1. Introduction

Parental responsiveness is the extent to which parents use nurturance, affection, involvement, and support in the child rearing process (Baumrind, 1978). Parental responsiveness is an important socialization means in a family (for a review, see Bogenschneider et al., 1998), which is especially important for adolescents, because adolescents are at a stage of seeking for independence from their parents while, paradoxically, striving to remain connected to them (Youniss and Smollar, 1985). At this life stage, emotional connectedness with parents, as parental responsiveness fosters, plays a more important role in guiding the behaviors of adolescents than physical rules and supervision do (Bogenschneider et al., 1998).

Acknowledging the important role of parental responsiveness, researchers associate this parenting strategy with a variety of socialization outcome variables. In consumer research, scholars associate parental responsiveness with adolescents' use of influence strategies in family purchases (Bao et al., 2007). In public policy and marketing research, researchers relate parental responsiveness to adolescents' sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Moore et al., 2002), credit card abuse (Palmer et al., 2001), and smoking development and progression (Yang and Schaninger, 2010). In the

psychology and public health literatures, parental responsiveness is an important predictor of undesirable adolescent behaviors such as early drinking, smoking and drug taking (Bogenschneider et al., 1998; Windle, 1999).

The study here extends the existing literature to examine the effect of parental responsiveness on an under-examined consumer socialization variable, adolescents' susceptibility to peer influence (SPI), that is, adolescents' tendency to look to standards from peers in developing their own motivations, attitudes, and behavior. Previous studies establish the important role of peer influence in consumer decision making. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence, for example, is a key factor in shaping consumers' attitudes, norms, values and aspirations (Batra et al., 2001), affecting product and brand choice (Wooten and Reed, 2004), selecting service providers (Keaveney, 1995), and diffusing information regarding new products (Dawar et al., 1996). However, little is known about how parent–child interaction styles, such as parental responsiveness, may affect adolescents' development of SPI.

Peer influence is critical to advance knowledge about adolescent consumers, as adolescence is a stage when individuals are highly susceptible to ideas and trends popular among their peers (Rose et al., 1998). A better understanding of the potential impact of parental responsiveness on SPI is important to both marketers and social workers. As Rose (1999) points out, parental style is an important segmentation variable. Knowing about the extent to which parents in a family are responsive to their offspring can help marketers distinguish the kids who are highly susceptible to peer influence from those who have low levels of susceptibility. Marketers can then

develop different communication strategies (e.g., peer-oriented vs. parent-oriented advertisements) to target these groups. Social workers can also use this information to develop educational programs to teach parents to change their parental styles as an approach to help their kids fight against unwanted peer influence.

Some marketing practitioners start to acknowledge the important role that parental responsiveness plays in adolescent consumption-related behaviors. Social workers, for example, use advertisements to encourage parents to communicate with their teenagers about sex as a way to prevent teens from engaging in risky sexual behavior (Tanner et al., 2008). Organizations such as Tobacco Free Kids have also used advertising campaigns and web sites to teach parents about how to be more responsive to their teenage children as part of the effort to curtail teen smoking (Yang and Schaninger, 2010).

Although little research examines the effect of parental responsiveness on SPI, previous studies in developmental psychology show that responsiveness exerts a great deal of impact on adolescents' affiliation to deviant peers (Oxford et al., 2000), reliance on parents vs. peers to solve their personal problems (Bogenschneider et al., 1998), and following their best friend to engage in deviant behaviors such as shoplifting (Fuligni and Eccles, 1993). These studies provide a solid foundation for the current research to explore how parental responsiveness may affect peer influence at a broader level, focusing on the general tendency of adolescents being influenced by peers in purchasing commodities.

The study here incorporates two additional factors – namely adolescent self-concept and culture – in the conceptual framework: adolescent self-concept likely mediates, whereas culture likely moderates the effects of parental responsiveness. The focus on self-concept as a key mechanism underlying the influence of parental responsiveness on SPI is due to the fact that the adolescent years are a period of self-discovery, a time of transition when children are trying to discover their identity as adults. At this internally precarious time in their lives, self-concept plays an important role in determining adolescents' psychological development and tendency to be influenced by peers.

Culture is a matrix that shapes the nature of interpersonal exchanges in society and provides the context within which parental influences on adolescents play out (Laroche et al., 2007; Leung et al., 1998). Despite the important role of culture in consumer socialization, prior researchers have not studied the effect of parental responsiveness on adolescents' self-concept or SPI across different cultural contexts yet. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on cultural differences in socialization goals between China and Canada, and its implications for the effect of parental responsiveness.

Canada is a typical individualist culture that views the self as a unique entity, while China is a typical collectivist culture that views the self as embedded in group memberships (Triandis, 1995). The overall societal orientation toward individualism or collectivism can moderate the influence of parental responsiveness on adolescent self-concept and SPI. The theoretical framework in this study represents a first attempt to examine the antecedents and psychological processes underlying adolescent SPI.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Self-Concept

Self-concept is "conceptions of physical characteristics, typical activities and abilities, relationships and personality traits, and cognitive and emotional qualities" (Hart and Fegley, 1997, p. 130). From this definition, self-concept appears to be a multifaceted construct that is a result of the developmental interaction between the understanding that adolescents have of themselves and the views about them from social contexts (Oppenheimer, 1990). The study here focuses on three specific components that relate to the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of the self-concept, respectively.

Self-construal is the cognitive aspect of self that shows what individuals think about themselves, especially in terms of how self relates to others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). There are two types of self-construal: independent and interdependent. People with a dominant independent self-construal value autonomy and separateness of the self from others. In contrast, those with a dominant interdependent self-construal value connectedness or relatedness of self to others, which involves self-presentations that are blended with representations of others, shared social norms, and flexible interpersonal boundaries (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

More recent research (e.g., Gardner et al., 1999) suggests that in any given culture, people simultaneously possess both types of self-construals that differ in availability and accessibility. To avoid potential confounding effects caused by the dimensionality of self-construal, the present research only assesses participants' extent to which they construe themselves interdependently. Self-esteem is the affective component of the self that reflects one's feelings of his/her own worthiness and competence (Cooley, 1902). Self-monitoring is the social aspect of self that refers to the propensity to monitor and control one's own self-presentation behaviors in order to seek social appropriateness (Snyder, 1974).

A central theme among theories of self-concept is that one's social experiences influence self. From an early age, parents provide their children with information about cultural priorities and parental expectations (LeVine et al., 1994). Through many interactions with their parents, children internalize these inputs, slowly building different aspects of their self-concept. In this process, supportive social experiences, such as responsive parenting, may be especially effective in facilitating transmission of parental values to adolescents.

Responsive parenting fosters an emotionally supportive parent–child relationship (Peterson and Hann, 1999) that likely encourages the child to identify with parents and thus absorb their attitudes, values and role expectations. Building on this insight, the study develops a parent-self-peer model (see Fig. 1) about the effects of parental responsiveness on three dimensions self-concept – namely interdependent self-construal, self-esteem, and self-monitoring – and the subsequent effects of these dimensions of self-concept on SPI. Culture sets a boundary for these effects.

2.2. Parental responsiveness and adolescent interdependent self-construal

Little is known about the impact of parental socialization efforts on the development of cognitive self-concept or self-construal, although researchers argue that the culture one resides in shapes and guides the construction of the type of self-construal that is consistent with the values of the larger society (Yamada and Singelis, 1999). The general conception of cross-cultural researchers is that there is a tendency for individuals in individualist cultures (e.g., Canada and the United States) to be more independent, while individuals in collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan) tend to be more interdependent (Singelis, 1994; Yamada and Singelis, 1999). However, this phenomenon only exists at the group level. Significant individual differences in self-construal are present within one culture. While some American adolescents seek more independence (i.e., self-determination) and differentiation (i.e., distinctiveness), others assign more priority to relationships over self-achievements (Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

The parent-self-peer model in Fig. 1 depicts that parental responsiveness may negatively affect interdependent self-construal for the Canadian adolescents, but positively affect interdependent self-construal for the Chinese adolescents. The rationale is that the interdependent self-construal is consistent with the socialization goals of Chinese society, but not with those of Canadian society. The socialization goals of Chinese society are to train youngsters to get along with others, to conform to the group, and to well-behave, while