

An Exploratory Investigation of Secondary Socialization: How Adult Children Teach Their Parents to Use Technology

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Abstract

This paper examines secondary socialization processes as adult children (i.e., college students) teach their parents/guardians about technology. Informants were asked to write an essay about how they taught their parent/guardian to use a computer. Data were analyzed and interpreted according to the protocol for phenomenology. The adult children utilized three teaching strategies (modeling, reinforcement, and simplification) in socializing their parents. The study also identified social dynamics that took place during the secondary socialization process. The contribution of the study lies in examining secondary socialization processes, as opposed to the content of learning. Specifically, the study identifies three unique teaching styles utilized by the adult children and highlights the frustration that can take place during the secondary socialization process. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: secondary socialization, computers, adult children, parents, teaching

1. Introduction

As early as 1974, Ward proposed consumer socialization as an important construct to help marketers understand how children develop into adult consumers. Ward (1974) recognized that consumer socialization is a lifelong process and yet much of marketers' efforts have been devoted to studying primary socialization, at the expense of secondary socialization. The literature on consumer socialization has focused more heavily on how parents (and also media) impact the development of their children (Bao et al., 2007; Bjurstrom, 2002; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008; Carlson and Grossbart, 1988; Carlson et al., 1992; Moschis, 1985; Rose, 1999). However, some academics have recently advocated for a wider view of socialization in which the child is an active agent that also socializes the parent over time (Ekström, 2006; Ekström, 2007; Grossbart, et al., 2002).

Despite the calls advocating for a wider view of socialization, marketers still know very little about how adult children teach their parents to consume. For example, Commuri and Gentry (2000) state, "little is known about parental learning" and "more understanding is needed of influence generated within the extended family" (p.7). Ekström (2006) states that "there is insufficient research on the actual processes through which consumer socialization occurs. Focus has been on the content of learning, rather than how learning is acquired" (p. 77). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine secondary socialization processes as adult children teach their parents/guardians about technology.

This study makes a contribution to the literature by unpacking the processes used by the adult children in socializing their parents. To that end, the present study examined the following research questions: what are the various processes that adult children use to teach their parents about computers and what are the social dynamics that exist as adult children socialize their parents? In pursuit of these research questions, the literature review is presented below.

2. Theoretical Foundation: Secondary Socialization

Because there are several review articles published on consumer socialization (i.e., Ward et al., 1990; Roedder-John, 1999), this literature review focuses less on primary consumer socialization and more on those articles that highlight the influence and socialization that children exert on their parents (i.e., secondary socialization). It should also be noted that the literature on secondary socialization in marketing focuses heavily on younger children influencing their parents, so the literature review examines many studies related to younger, as opposed to older/adult, children. When examining the literature on children influencing their parents, we identified four general themes as highlighted below.

2.1 Influence on Purchase Decisions

The vast majority of studies focus on children's influence on their parent's purchase decisions. For example, Ekström et al. (1987) studied when children influence family decision making. They found that children exert influence when the family structure and communication patterns are accommodating, when families are high in socio-economic status and the child has the resources to exert influence, and when the child has expert knowledge in the product category. Watne et al. (2011) similarly examined when children exert influence on family decision making, concluding that influence exists when children have expert knowledge in the product category.

Götze et al. (2009) found that children's depth of product knowledge has a significant influence on parents' purchase decisions. These authors found that children used the influence tactics of persuasion, requests, emotion, and bargaining to shape their parents purchasing. Focusing more on secondary socialization, Ekström (2007) studied "retroactive socialization" in which "a child can learn consumer-related skills from peers and media and then influence his/her parents with those skills" (p. 206). Ekström found that the influence process is especially strong in the context of technology-related products. In her study of children's influence on parent's decision making, Ekström concluded that children assume the role of teacher in domains in which they have expert power.

Because the literature to date has focused on children *influencing* their parent's purchases, it appears that researchers have not been able to adequately unpack the subtle learning processes of secondary socialization that may be a result of daily interactions over time (Ekström, 2007; Roedder-John, 1999). The focus on influence strategies in decision making limits the research to the examination of discrete requests for product purchase, which are more one time interactions, short negotiations, or moments of influence. Thus, the focus on influence in decision making does not bode well for understanding the process of secondary socialization. Simply put, marketers know what influence strategies are being used by children on their parents, but marketers have yet to fully understand the *teaching* strategies being utilized by both young and older children in socializing their parents.

2.2 Product Knowledge and Expert Power

The majority of studies on influence and secondary socialization point to the idea that secondary socialization takes place when the children have in-depth knowledge of the product category that results in expert power over their parents. Foxman et al. (1989a) found that children influence their parents for a variety of products, but that influence tended to be stronger when the products were less expensive and for the children's usage. Ekström (2007) and Götze et al. (2009) also identified influence across a variety of product categories. Despite finding influence across a variety of products, most of the articles on secondary socialization published to date focus on the context of technology. For example, Kalmus (2007) found that European adolescents learned about the Internet from their friends and then in turn taught what they learned to their mothers and fathers. Kalmus (2007) concludes that the younger generation of consumers has power over their parents due to their expertise in technological products. Thus, the literature shows that children influence their parent's decision making when the children have knowledge of the product category that is greater than the parents' level of knowledge. This knowledge translates into expert power, especially in the domain of technology, and that children (whether younger or older) then shape their parents' consumer behaviors.

2.3 Importance of the Product

The third theme that emerged from the review of literature was that children were more likely to influence their parents when the product was for their own or family use, as opposed to when the product was for solely parent use. Foxman et al. (1989 a, b), for example, found that children influenced parents when they considered the product important and when it was for their own use. In their replication and extension, Beatty and Talpade (1994) similarly assert that “product importance and usage provided the most consistent explanations for the influence that teenagers believe they have in family decision making” (p. 338). Recent studies reaffirm this assertion and yet others have begun to contradict it. For example, Brown and Venkatesh (2005) found that children have influence in products that they will consume and for products in which they have a high level of knowledge. In contrast, Watne et al. (2011) conclude that children influence parent decision making even when the product is primarily for the parents’ consumption.

Thus, the literature implies that marketers know that when children care about the product, they are more likely to influence their parents’ purchases. And yet, this may not always be case. Furthermore, this perspective is again grounded in the domain of influence strategies (i.e., discrete requests), rather than the teaching processes children use in socializing adults. While marketers understand that children are more likely to influence parents’ purchasing when the product is important to them, marketers still do not definitely know whether children will teach their parents even when they are not going to use the product themselves. Older children, for example, might have their own version of the product and thus are not going to use their parents’, but may still help teach them to use it.

2.4 Resistance to the Influence

The final theme that emerged from the review of the literature was that, at times, parents put up resistance to secondary socialization processes. For example, a key finding in Ekström’s (2007) study was that, at times, children’s attempts to influence their parents resulted in a “boomerang effect” in which “children’s attempts to influence parents can backfire, making parents less susceptible to influence” (p. 215). Watne et al. (2011) describe a similar resistance to influence when they argue that “parents have to concede that their children have [expert] power before it can be used in persuasion situations” (p. 288). These findings may be due to parental style, as some researchers have found that parental reaction to the influence (i.e., resistance versus acceptance) is contingent upon the style of the parents and related family communication patterns (Gentina and Muratore, 2012; Grossbart et al., 2002).

Thus, the literature shows that parents, at times, may put up resistance to secondary socialization. Furthermore, resistance (or acceptance) appears to be related to communication patterns and parental style. However, while marketers are aware of potential parental resistance to secondary socialization, they still do not fully understand the perspective of an adult child when the parent is putting up resistance. The question remains as to what kinds of tensions exist as adult children attempt to teach their parents in the secondary socialization process and how does the adult child react to such tensions? Below are the methodological details related to the data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

3. Method

The ontological approach to data collection was grounded in phenomenology, as described by various researchers both within and outside the field of marketing (Thompson et al., 1989; Moustakas, 1994; Goulding, 2005; Willis, 2007). Asking informants to tell a story about their experience is consistent with previous research in marketing and phenomenology (Ardley, 2006; Levy, 1981; Levy, 1994). This ontological approach follows the recommendation of Ekström (2006) who states that “there is a need to use interpretive methods” to “...better understand the dialogs and negotiations that are involved in consumer socialization processes” (p. 90). Furthermore, Ekström (2006) advocates that researchers study socialization utilizing methods that capture transfers across generations, such as narratives and stories (p. 90).

3.1 Sample

Prior to data collection, the authors sought approval for the study and its procedures via their university’s internal review board (IRB). The sampling procedure was based on the following criteria: adult children (i.e., college students) who have experience with computers and have shared that experience with their parents or guardians (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

It should be noted that the sample represented “adult children,” as opposed to young children or adolescents. College students were selected for the sample because 98.4% of this population report having a computer (Anderson, 2007). In addition, college students are ‘digital natives’ who have grown up immersed in technology, unlike previous generations (Prensky 2001). Utilizing older children is also somewhat consistent with previous research. Ekström (2007), for example, states that “children become, with increasing age, more knowledgeable and parents are more likely to consider them trustworthy” and “children between the ages of 20 and 30 years old have a great deal of influence” (p. 213). For the present study, informants were on average 22.8 years old (range 18 to 56 years old) and included 51% males and 49% females.

Informants were recruited via a large-section, Principles of Marketing class at a large, southeastern university in the United States (n=1,238). Each semester over a two-year period, students in the class were asked to voluntarily participate in an academic study about computers. The informants could opt out of the study at any time with no consequences for a lack of participation (Tisdall et al., 2009). Three separate databases were used to protect the identity of the students. The first database stored responses to a request for informed consent. The second database stored the actual written responses. The third database was not linked to the second database and stored their names.

3.2 Procedures

The informants who agreed to participate in the study were placed at a computer in a lab and asked to write an essay about “how you taught your parent/guardian to use a computer.” The directions at the beginning of the essay signaled to the informant to “provide as much detail as possible, such as who they taught, when they taught the parent/guardian about computers, what they taught them, how they taught them, and any other details they could remember about the experience.” Other than those directions, the essays were open-ended and unstructured. The informants had up to 90 minutes to complete their essays, and the time taken to complete the essays ranged from 15 minutes to 78 minutes. As explained above, data were collected on the computer and then placed into a database for analysis. The informant’s essays ranged from 1 to 7 pages in length. Transcripts were then printed from the database of responses.

The transcripts of data were analyzed and interpreted according to the protocol for phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Finlay, 2009). First, the authors attempted to identify and set aside any pre-existing biases or judgments related to the subject matter. This was accomplished by the authors brainstorming and generating a list of beliefs, behaviors, and previous experiences that have potential to bias the interpretation process (Colaizzi, 1973). During the second step, the authors each independently reviewed the transcripts of data, moving back and forth between specific pieces of data and the data set as a whole. In this process, the authors sought to identify significant statements (i.e., textural language) from each of the essays in an effort to understand the holistic experience of the informants. Next, the authors combined the significant statements into categories that represented factors driving the phenomenon. The authors then came together to discuss their individual coding, categories, and category meanings until they came to consensus on the interpretation.

4. Findings

Consumer socialization is often thought to be a subtle process and parents may not set out to consciously or overtly teach their children about consumption (Ekström, 2007; Roedder-John, 1999). However, the findings for the present study revealed a very different phenomenon. The data showed that the adult children consciously developed strategies and tactics to teach their parents about the computer. Furthermore, the teaching process was not always smooth and easy. From the perspective of the adult children, the secondary socialization process was, at times, frustrating as they perceived tension in working with their parents. The specific findings are detailed below.

4.1 What did adult children teach their parents?

In the essays, the adult children characterized the parent as a novice user or beginner, who needed to learn the basic functions of both hardware and software. For example, Elizabeth (age 41) explained how she had to help her mother (age 59) learn about both hardware and software so that they could stay in touch. Her mother was a novice and thus their lessons started with the basics of the hardware, such as turning on the computer and using the mouse. The lessons then moved onto email software.

My mother just recently bought a laptop computer. She wanted to be able to communicate with me because we live so far away from each other. She lives in England and I live in the USA. About two months ago, I taught her how to open the computer, turn it on, use the mouse, and connect to the Internet. I spent a lot of time explaining how the Windows tab worked. I also showed her how to create an email account and then I explained how she would be able to see if she had any new emails in the Inbox. I also showed her how to reply to an email.

Within the essays, software was discussed far more frequently than hardware. Even when the adult child discussed teaching hardware elements, he/she often had to teach software applications at the same time or soon thereafter. In other words, teaching parents about the on/off switch and mouse is only half the battle, as the end-goal is often related to the software itself. There was a long list of software applications discussed among the essays, such as Windows, MS Office, email applications (i.e., MS Outlook, Gmail), search engines (i.e., Google), digital camera software, Facebook, and iTunes. As an example, Ava (age 27) discussed how she had to teach her mother (age 56) how to use Powerpoint.

My Mother is a doctor. She needed to create a Powerpoint presentation and was not sure how to use Powerpoint. I helped her with the presentation by showing her different option and tools to make her presentation look more interesting. I taught her how to insert pictures, change fonts and select different backgrounds.

In the majority of the discussions about what the adult child was teaching the parent, the informants also relayed why the parents requested assistance. The informants reported three basic motivations, socio-emotional (e.g., to connect with others in their network, such as using Skype to talk with family), experiential (e.g., to use iTunes to download music for entertainment), and functional (e.g., new/existing employment was forcing the parent to learn about Excel, as tasks at work were being automated). Interestingly, the different motivations underlying the secondary socialization process all seemed to relate to the fact that the parents were facing changes in their life course that appeared to drive the request for help from their adult children (Moschis, 2007; Epp and Price, 2008).

4.2 How did the adult children teach their parents?

In the data, the informants reported socializing the parents via three different teaching strategies: modeling, reinforcement, and simplification. Modeling was based on observational learning. The informants described the teaching as taking place via demonstration, where they sat down at the computer and “showed” their parents how to use the hardware and/or software. The informants typically invoked two metaphors when describing teaching via modeling, “showed” and “step-by-step.” For example, Chloe (age 21), used modeling in her teaching and described it in terms of “showing” her mother (age 48) how to do it.

My mom understood how to generally use the computer but there were different things for different programs that she wasn't sure how to do. Instead of just exploring the programs and figuring out how to work it like kids our age do, she just wanted to know how to do it. So she asked me to teach her. I sat down at the computer showed her things like being able to use Excel, forwarding email messages, and how to use programs like Facebook.

The other metaphor that informants frequently invoked while describing modeling was using a “step-by-step” approach. The adult children described a process whereby they provided demonstration based teaching but tried to break down the process into small “steps” for the adult. An example of using the process in a “step-by-step” fashion is described by Noah (age 23) who taught his mother (age 50) to use computer software:

About two years ago, my mother began a new job working as a collections assistant. She had no real previous professional computing experience and her job involved working on a computer all day. So she needed to learn the basics of certain programs such as Microsoft Excel, Word, and email. I first began by showing her the basics of Excel. The first step was to show her how to enter data into cells. Then I showed her how to format cells to fit the data best and how to organize data so it was easy to read. Then I showed her the basics of entering formulas for equations into the cells. This step she struggled with because of having to type in the cell location. The next program I introduced to her was Microsoft Word. I mainly showed her how to change formatting preferences, set up margins, and how to use the spelling and grammatical tools. The final program I showed her how to use was email. I walked her through the steps of entering the information needed to set up her account.

Many of the informants also discussed note taking as a way to facilitate learning via modeling. Notes that accompanied the modeling process were taken in two forms: the parent jotting down the steps described by the teacher or the teacher making notes that he/she then gave to the parent at the end of the demonstration. While both were present in the data, the latter note taking process was discussed more frequently, as illustrated by Madison (age 46):

I recently explained how to use e-mail and Facebook to my mother [age 66], so she could keep in touch with her grandchildren in different states. I opened the browser and showed her how to click on links and how to make sure the curser was in the box you want to type in. I also showed her how to Google things she was interested in, such as crochet web sites. I left her notes on each site, including e-mail and Facebook, in case she forgot what to click to open each.

Furthermore, it appeared that the notes served as the primary educational material used to support the teaching and learning process, as only seven (of the more than 1,000 essays in the sample) discussed using more formal educational materials in the teaching process (such as books or tutorial software).

The informants also reported utilizing reinforcement as a teaching method. Reinforcement was based on learning via hands-on experiences. Within the essays, the informants identified a process where they had the parents take control over the computer, handling all functions themselves, as the adult children “coached” them through the learning process. William (age 19) utilized reinforcement in teaching his Dad (age 52) about the computer.

I helped teach my dad how to use the Internet and templates in Word for creating a resume. I did not let my dad watch. Instead, I coached him through the process so he was able to do it himself the next time.

In contrast to modeling, where the adult child maintained control over the computer and demonstrated for the parent, reinforcement was based on the idea that the parent would learn more effectively if he/she was actually sitting in front of the computer and attempting the task him/herself. For those adult children who used reinforcement as their teaching style, they presented a view that trial and error on the computer itself was the most effective way to teach the parents. When using reinforcement, the teacher consciously chose to let the learner experiment with and control the technology, as illustrated in a quote by Aiden (age 21) who was teaching his 45 year old father.

I taught him by sitting down beside him, but letting him be in control of the computer. I taught him how to use Excel to help him with his work. He needed to know Excel in order to be more efficient--the way he was currently doing his work was taking a lot longer than it would have by using Excel. I started by getting him familiar with the menus up at the top. I then had him enter the data that he needed for his work and then I showed him the different ways he could use the formulas that he needed. I talked him through how to highlight the cells needed and then how you can drag the formulas over to other cells.

When compared to modeling, where the adult children talked about teaching as “showing” the parent how to use the computer, reinforcement evoked a different metaphor for the informants. Under reinforcement, the informants discussed that they decided to let the parent “drive” as much as possible, elaborating that the teacher sat next to the parent who was in front of the computer and talked him/her through the learning process. The driving metaphor illustrates that the adult children identified with how they had been taught to use other technology (i.e., the automobile) when they were in a similar situation to the parent. Reinforcement mirrors this process as described by Emily (age 38) helping her aunt (age 70) become acquainted with Facebook:

She had been familiar with email, and did not see the difference between Facebook and email. She was posting public messages through her email and did not understand that these were publicly viewable. Many terms like “wall” or “page” were unfamiliar to her. ... Many of the older adults need the face-to-face interaction because they don’t have the computer experience that younger and middle-aged adults have. A lot of the terminology that we take for granted is just not part of their experience. If I say click, double-click, or right-click, this alone has created confusion and I find it best to be patient, let them “drive” as much as possible, and reassure them.

The third teaching method utilized by the informants was simplification. This teaching strategy involved the informant utilizing the technology to simplify the activities required for the learner. Within the stories, many of the informants stated that they provided the parent with tools that would make learning about and using the computer easier.

These tools simplified the process, such as providing “desk-top icons” for the programs the parent needed to access or saving preferred websites under the “favorites” menu on Google so that the parent would not have to recall multiple steps in accessing a particular website. In essence, the informant created a short cut, simplifying the steps involved in using the computer, which helped the parent use a certain software or access a particular website. Michael (age 22) discussed how he utilized simplification when teaching his mother (age 50).

My mother, like all baby boomers, fails at anything having to do with a computer. She can use office products and a web browser, but she is hopeless with anything else (and watching her surf the web is like watching a retarded baby try to do algebra). Though she spends ten hours a day in front of a computer, she still has no idea how it works, which I will never understand. If a task requires clicking on more than two things, she will not remember it. I gave up trying to teach her things, and just started putting shortcuts to scripts to do the things she wants on her desktop. For example, I showed her Pandora.com, which she really liked, but couldn't remember the URL. I put a shortcut to “Firefox <http://pandora.com>” on her desktop. I wrote a script that backs up her folders from work onto an external drive and put that script on her desktop as well. She can just click it to back up her files. So her desktop is cluttered with all kinds of shit like that.

Michael stated that he started out “trying to teach her things” but became frustrated and eventually “gave up.” However, he did not abandon his mother who was trying to learn and, instead, ended up creating short cuts that he put on her desktop. That way, he only had to teach her one step, and she would then be using the computer in the way she wanted.

Other informants, while less inflammatory as Michael, also talked about the need to “simplify” the process as much as possible when teaching the adult about the computer. And yet each of the simplification stories implied that the informant resorted to this style of teaching because the adult child felt the parent was not catching on quickly enough. Daniel (age 30) provides an example of teaching his mother (age 56) to use basic computer commands:

My mother purchased a computer for no other reason than she thought she needed one. She had no clue how to turn it on or use a mouse. We started with basic Windows usage such as double-clicking and opening files. She learned word-processing programs fairly quickly because she had experience with hard-copy documents. However, such functions as finding an Internet service provider, remembering a password, and navigating the Internet were beyond her. I started by trying to make things as easy as possible—setting up her Internet settings to automatically connect, bookmarking her favorite web pages, and teaching her the magic of the Google toolbar. She still lacks confidence in trying new things on the computer and is speedy to call and ask for directions rather set off on her own.

Simplification appears to be a unique contribution to the literature on consumer socialization. While previous research has identified modeling and reinforcement as learning processes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978), none have proposed that simplification would be another method for socialization to take place. Simplification as a teaching style is consistent with current research on the millennial generation (i.e., those born between 1980 and 2000). Research show that millennials deal with information curvilinear fashion, piecing information together from multiple sources. Research also shows that the life-long interaction with computers and technology has led the millennials to learn more through inductive discovery, shifting attention rapidly from one thing to another, and have a high expectancy for rapid responses (Greenberg, 2008; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Oblinger, 2003). All of these characteristics of the millennials translate into an understanding of why simplification is a relevant teaching style as adult children socialize their parents about computers. It appeared that the informants were often frustrated by the linear thinking and lack of immediate learning that occurred as they were teaching their parents to use the computer. So, the millennial resorts to what he/she knows, utilizing technological shortcuts to simplify the process.

4.3 What dynamics existed as the adult children socialized their parents?

Consistent with previous research on consumer socialization, the data also showed that the secondary socialization process was laden with tensions between the informants and their parents (Ekström, 2007; Epp and Price, 2008). Within the essays, the informants recalled their frustration with the teaching process. The adult children discussed that they were often frustrated with the lack of typing skills, poor memory, weak listening skills, and slow learning curve exhibited by their parents. Emma (age 22) described such frustration.

My mom [age 46] always has trouble opening her emails or printing something off the computer. Every time when I tried to teach her, I would lose my patience after a while. When she had done it for the first time, she would still need my help the next time. It seems like it is hard for her to remember anything that is related to the computer.

Many of the informants wrote that they perceived their parents were also frustrated with the process as well. Olivia (age 20), for example, stated that while she was frustrated with the teaching process, she believed that her Dad was also aggravated with the learning process.

My dad [age 50] works with telecommunications, so he is familiar with computer usage such as excel and can probably tell you far more about some of it than I can. However, there are other, more modern, things such as Photoshop and Facebook that isn't quite up my Dad's alley, which he wanted to learn, so I was responsible for teaching him. My dad started running a website and he asked for my help with Photoshop. He wanted to learn how to make pictures look the best they could on the website. He did well with the basics such as cropping and all-over color editing, but when it came to more in-depth Photoshop tasks, it did not go well. It can be quite frustrating trying to teach someone who has no clue how to run these programs, because not only was I getting frustrated that he didn't immediately understand it, but he got frustrated that he wasn't understanding it either.

Previous research suggests that secondary socialization takes place when the child has expert product knowledge and thus power over the parents (Kalmus, 2007; Watne and Brennan, 2009). The reversal of traditional roles (i.e., when the parent has the power and socializes the child) can be uncomfortable for the two parties involved in the secondary socialization process, even for adult children. Some of the informants speculated that this role reversal was a source of tension, as explained by Jayden (age 21).

She [my Mother, age 53] was reluctant to let me help her, but I took the mouse, hit refresh, and the page loaded. The problem was that she got impatient with the slow download process the first time, and she believed that clicking the link would speed it up, which is obviously not the case. She gave me a subtle smile, almost a nonverbal way of saying, "You little know-it-all, they are teaching you something in school."

Mia (age 20) also suspected that her mother (age 50) was somewhat embarrassed by the role reversal that took place in the secondary socialization process.

I also taught my mom how to make charts with Microsoft Excel, so that she can customize it how she needed. I taught her how to format and edit the spreadsheet (merge and center, copy and paste, delete columns/rows, insert columns/rows, sum function, etc.). She had a lot of "ah ha" moments. She kind of felt silly asking me for help, but she was very grateful because my shortcuts helped her finish her tasks faster.

The goal for the informants appeared to be teaching parents so that they eventually became independent in their usage of the computer. For example, phrases such as, "he [my father] can now manage on his own" was a common way for the informants to describe the success they had in teaching the adult. However, the parent actually achieving independence was not common to the data. In fact, most of the informants discussed that they felt a continued dependence of the parent over time. The informants presented what appeared to be a "porous learning effect," where the adult did not retain the material that they had been taught and, therefore, asked the child to teach them the same material over and over again. For example, Abigail (age 21) stated the following:

My mother [age 40] was trying to figure out how to add an attachment to an email. I showed her which button to click and how to find her attachment. She has a really hard time remembering how to do things she didn't already know how to do, so I've had to teach her the same thing repeatedly. The first time I taught her how to add an attachment, I was 12 years old. She still calls me to this day, almost ten years later! And I always have to repeat the same things that we talked about in the past.

There is very little discussion of dependence in the secondary socialization literature, with the exception of Watne and Brennan (2009). These researchers found that parents often accepted the children's advice on product purchase without adjusting their own knowledge. In their study, the parent's low level of product knowledge remained the same, even after gaining advice from their children. This study's findings appear to be consistent with Watne and Brennan (2009) in that the adult children did not feel that their parents were significantly improving their knowledge (i.e., a porous learning effect).

5. Discussion

This study examined the teaching processes adult children used to teach their parents and the related social dynamics as perceived by the adult children. To date, the process aspects of secondary socialization are not well understood (Ekström, 2006) and this study makes a contribution to the literature in that it unpacks the processes used by adult children when socializing their parents about technology. The secondary socialization process identified by this study was somewhat different from the traditional socialization process as identified in previous research. Consumer socialization is often thought to be subtle and somewhat subconscious (Ekström, 2006). In contrast, this study found secondary socialization processes in which children consciously taught their parents about technology. In addition, the secondary socialization process appeared to cause frustration between the adult children and their parents.

In unpacking the process of secondary socialization, the authors identified three teaching strategies that adult children used to socialize their parents: modeling, reinforcement, and simplification. Modeling was the most frequent teaching method utilized in the secondary socialization process and reinforcement was the second most utilized technique. Modeling was a demonstration-based style, where the adult child “showed” the parent how to use the computer. In contrast, reinforcement was based on coaching the learner, in which the adult child had the parent sit down and learn about the computer via hands-on experimentation. Within modeling, the adult child controlled the computer while the parent observed, and within reinforcement the parent controlled the computer while the adult child talked him/her through the experience. Simplification was the third teaching method utilized by the informants. Simplification appears to be somewhat new to the literature on consumer socialization. Simplification involved the adult child creating short cuts that he/she then taught to the parent in order to make the learning process easier to understand and achieve the goal more quickly. Simplification as a teaching method in the consumer socialization should be examined across a variety of contexts. While simplification appears to be an effective teaching method for computers, the question remains as to how this strategy is being used by adult children who teach their parents in other contexts.

Another key finding of the study was that the informants reported frustration with the teaching process and perceived that the parents were also frustrated with the learning process. Furthermore, the adult children reported having to teaching the same material repeatedly to their parents. Even when the parent was able to retain the information, the adult child felt a continued dependency over time. While socialization has traditionally been based on the idea that the child learns to become independent from the parent, this study’s findings suggest that parents may become more dependent on their adult children as the secondary socialization process continues plays out. This dependence may have partly contributed to the frustrations felt by the adult children.

The secondary socialization processes identified in this study provide insight for how adults learn from those who are younger within today’s society. Indeed, companies are beginning to utilize the millennials to teach older employees about computers and technology (Kwoh, 2011). However, this is new territory for these organizations. Collins, Hair, and Rocco (2009) examined generational differences between older employees and younger supervisors. They found that older workers expect less effective leadership from younger supervisors and rate them lower when compared to older supervisors. If companies continue along this path, they will need to understand the different teaching styles younger employees could utilize (such as modeling, reinforcement and simplification), as well as social interaction issues that may arise (such as frustration) in the process.

With respect to limitations and directions for future research, the current study was limited to adult children as the sample. The average age of the informants was 22.8 years old and ranged from 18 to 56. Future research should examine secondary socialization with younger children, adolescents, teenagers and their parents. In addition, the current study relies on only one side of the parent/child dyad for purposes of data collection. Future research needs to examine the secondary socialization process from the perspective of the parents. These types of studies could focus on motivations, learning processes, and the parents’ perceptions of secondary socialization. Future research also needs to examine secondary socialization across a variety of contexts, beyond technology. As today’s baby boomers continue to live longer, adult children may need to socialize their parents in services, such as financial planning and health care management. One may ask if frustration only accompanies teaching about technology or whether it applies to other products and services.

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