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# The Influence of Familial and Peer-based Reference Groups on Consumer Decisions

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A replication and extension of a study performed by Bearden and Etzel are reported in this article. The influence of peers on individuals' product and brand decisions for products that range in their degree of conspicuousness is examined for comparable samples in the United States and in Thailand to assess the validity of the original framework over time and across cultural contexts. Further, the influence of the family is addressed through an examination of *intergenerational influences* across the two cultures. The results of the study lend support to the original theoretical approach and also provide insight into how reference-group influence may vary depending on whether the influence is exercised by a member of a peer group or by a family member.

The pervasive use of spokespeople in product and service endorsements reflects the widely held belief that individuals who are admired or who belong to a group to which other individuals aspire can exercise an influence on information processing, attitude formation, and purchase behavior (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). The influence that groups have on the behavior of the individual has been recognized for some time in academic research as well (Merton and Rossi 1949). Individuals appear to act in a manner that is consistent with the social group with which they identify.

From a consumer-behavior perspective, it appears that products and brands that individuals select can be influenced by their reference groups (Bearden and Etzel 1982). The original concept of a reference group (Hyman 1942) has been refined and clarified, leading to distinctions between comparative reference groups, which are used for self-appraisal, and normative reference groups, which are groups that are used as a source of personal norms, attitudes, and values (Kelley 1947). Given the potential impact that both of these types of reference groups can have on individual decision mak-

ing and consumption behavior, scholarly scrutiny of reference group influences is clearly desirable.

In one such investigation, Bearden and Etzel (1982) examined how reference-group influence varied for products consumed publicly versus privately and for products considered luxuries versus those considered necessities. It is our purpose to replicate and extend their work as follows: (1) by performing a study similar to theirs we assess the stability of the observed relationships over time; (2) by performing a study similar to theirs in a different cultural context we assess the stability of the observed relationships across contexts; (3) by performing a study that examines the influence of parents on purchasing decisions we assess the stability of the basic theoretical approach across different types of group influence. Thus, it is anticipated that the findings from this study will build on existing knowledge regarding reference-group influence in at least two ways. First, the notion of a "reference group" will be expanded, and this study will allow for an assessment of which type of referent will exert influence in a given situation. Second, the examination of these effects in Thailand will show whether these influences are specific to one culture or whether susceptibility to reference-group influence is a universal human trait.

## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this study we distinguish between familial and peer-based reference groups and predict that these two groups will have different degrees of influence on the individual's purchase decision. Further, the degree of family-based influence is expected to vary across cultures that reflect different family types, depending on the relative significance of the family in the individual's

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consumption decision. Consequently, we first examine the reference-group construct and then introduce and review issues related to the types of reference groups. Specifically, we use the notion of *intergenerational influence* to examine family-based reference-group influences across cultures, in contrast to nonfamily, or peer-based, reference-group influences. We then link the notion of reference-group influence to the individual's consumption decision at the product and brand level using a conceptual framework that mirrors Bearden and Etzel's (1982).

### The Reference-Group Construct

The reference-group construct has supplanted the notion of group membership as one that explains group influence on individual behavior.<sup>1</sup> From marketing and consumer-behavior perspectives, the influence of reference groups on individual behavior is often manifested in the types of products and brands purchased by individuals. Referents with high credibility, such as those having presumed expertise, will often serve as sources of information-based influence for uncertain or uninformed consumers, utilitarian influence will be reflected in attempts to comply with the wishes of a reference group to avoid punishment or receive a reward, while value-expressive influence will be reflected in the need for psychological affiliation with the reference group (see, e.g., Deutsch and Gerard 1955).<sup>2</sup> On the basis of a recent attempt at scale validation by Bearden et al. (1989), it appears that consumer perceptions of utilitarian and value-expressive influence are not easily distinguished empirically; these two components appear to represent the notion of normative influence and can perhaps be combined, as first suggested by Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975).

Two types of reference groups have been suggested in the literature. Parents, teachers, and peers are representative of normative referents who provide the individual with norms, attitudes, and values through direct interaction. Comparative referents, such as sports heroes and entertainment figures, provide standards of achievement to which individuals aspire and are relatively further removed from the individual; thus, the individual is only able to observe the behavior of the referent and does not directly interact with him or her.<sup>3</sup> This distinction is analogous to the one proposed by Cocanongher and Bruce (1971), who distinguish between socially proximal referents, who operate in the

individual's immediate social network, and socially distant referents, who operate in the periphery of the individual's social domain. This distinction is significant because, as Bearden and Etzel (1982, p. 184) observe, the manifestation of "influence requires the opportunity for social interaction or public scrutiny of behavior." Socially proximal reference groups allow for a significant amount of interaction while socially distant referents allow for relatively little or no direct interaction. Socially distant referents do, however, provide significant opportunities for scrutiny of public behavior. Consequently, different types of referents likely will exert differing degrees of influence depending on the extent to which the consumption process is observable.

A finer distinction can be drawn in proximal reference groups between familial and peer groups. This distinction is particularly appropriate in light of the existing literature on the effect of family members on consumption decisions.

### Intergenerational Influence

The effect of the family in the socialization of offspring, often termed "intergenerational influence" (Moschis 1985, 1987), includes an impact on the individual's norms, attitudes, and values (see, e.g., Heckler, Childers, and Arunachalam 1989). In particular, intrafamily communication can influence brand preferences and loyalties, information search and examination patterns, media reliance, price sensitivity, and adherence to price-quality beliefs (Rao, Childers, and Dutta 1991). Further, communication patterns and intergenerational transfers may vary depending on the type of family (Schaninger and Buss 1986a).

The literature in sociology draws a distinction between two types of families: nuclear families and extended families (Schaninger and Buss 1986b). A typical nuclear family comprises two spouses and a small number of children representing one family unit. However, extended families typically comprise a patriarchal or matriarchal figure and numerous mature siblings who have spouses and progeny of their own and who all live in one large joint-family arrangement (Rao et al. 1991). Such an arrangement provides a considerably different environment for interaction and interpersonal influences on all members of the household, relative to the nuclear family environment. In particular, in extended families, multiple sources of influence based on observation and interaction can exist, and, therefore, the influence of family members on the individuals' consumption behavior will likely be relatively strong. Further, family members are likely to be of greater importance to the individual, because they identify with their relatives to a greater degree. This argument is based on the rationale that, in communalistic societies (which typically comprise extended families), individuals tend to identify more closely with their family than with outsiders, whereas the opposite would prevail in individ-

<sup>1</sup>The notion of reference-group influence is more specific than the notion of susceptibility to interpersonal influence, which has been studied in depth in the social psychology literature (see McGuire 1968; Moscovici 1985).

<sup>2</sup>See Bearden et al. (1989, 1990) for a detailed discussion of these three components of influence.

<sup>3</sup>It is interesting that the norms and values provided by the normative reference group can influence which comparative reference group is considered an appropriate referent by the individual.

ualistic societies (which typically comprise nuclear families).

The notion of family type is one that lends itself to examination in a cross-cultural context more readily than it does within the same culture. Specifically, the nuclear family is more prevalent in countries with individualistic societies, while extended families are more prevalent in countries with kinship-based cultures. For instance, the typical American family comprises an adult male and female and a few children who are less than 18 years old, whereas a typical family in Thailand comprises a head of the household, adult offspring and spouses, and associated grandchildren, all living in close physical proximity to one another (Suvannathat 1979). From the perspective of our research, we anticipate that such living arrangements, when combined with differences in family cohesiveness and in degrees of authoritarianism and identification with family members, will lead to different intergenerational transfers of consumption patterns on the one hand and peer influences on the other. Consequently, as will be described later, the study to be reported involved a comparison of reference-group influences on product and brand decisions between the United States and Thailand.

### Product Type

The exercise of reference-group influence on product and brand decisions will likely be facilitated by the degree to which social interaction occurs or public observation of consumption behavior occurs (Bearden and Etzel 1982). Specifically, in a purchase context, the degree to which products are discussed with referents and the degree to which they are observed in the consumption process should positively affect the degree of reference-group influence. This ability to observe consumption or interact with referents regarding the product is likely to be affected by the degree of conspicuousness of the product.

Bourne (1957, p. 218) identified two elements of product conspicuousness. First, luxuries, unlike necessities, are not owned by everybody and thus tend to be relatively more conspicuous. The second element of conspicuousness refers to the circumstance of consumption or the degree to which consumption is performed in public versus in private. By definition, publicly consumed products are more conspicuous than privately consumed products. Thus, four types of products emerge from this classification: publicly consumed luxuries, publicly consumed necessities, privately consumed luxuries, and privately consumed necessities.

The influence of reference groups is likely to vary across these four product categories and will also vary depending on whether the purchase decision is examined at the product level (i.e., whether to buy a trash compactor) or at the brand level (i.e., which brand of automobile to buy; Bearden and Etzel 1982, pp. 184–185). This argument rests on an implicit definition of reference

groups as peer groups. Bearden and Etzel present hypotheses suggesting strong reference-group influence in public consumption circumstances, or for luxuries, because these products are more conspicuous. As a consequence, the individual is able to observe the products and brands purchased by referents or interact with referents regarding the appropriate products and brands to buy. Conversely, for products that are not conspicuously consumed, the individual has little opportunity to interact with peers regarding the purchase of the product or the appropriate brand to purchase. Our predictions are entirely consistent with this argument; however, we augment Bearden and Etzel's perspective by suggesting that, in private consumption decisions, the family is likely to exert a relatively strong influence as manifested through intergenerational influences. Further, we suggest that these family-based influences will be magnified when a larger number of strong sources of family-based influence exist. Thus, intergenerational influences are likely to differ across cultural settings that represent different family types, depending on how many family members are available to exercise an influence on the individual and on how strongly the individual identifies with family members. For instance, when parents, uncles, and aunts who live in extended families (and are therefore likely to be parental authority figures) all consume similar products and the same brand, this consumption behavior will likely have a strong impact on the individual's brand loyalty.

Intergenerational influences can be manifested in numerous ways. Price consciousness, price sensitivity, information search behavior, store and brand loyalties, and responses to advertising and promotion are some of the more obvious consequences of parental influence on children's behavior. Consistent with Bearden and Etzel's study, we focus on the intergenerational transfer of brand loyalties as one key measure of intergenerational influence (Woodson, Childers, and Winn 1976). Specifically, we predict that offspring will be more likely to purchase the same brand as their parents for privately versus publicly consumed products. Further, this effect will be enhanced for extended families relative to nuclear families because, in extended families, there are potentially a greater number of strong sources of influence on the individual. To summarize the key aspects of the general rationale: for luxuries, the purchase decision will attract relatively high peer influence; for necessities, the purchase decision will attract relatively high familial influence; for publicly consumed products, the brand choice will attract relatively high peer influence; and for privately consumed products, the brand choice will attract relatively high familial influence. Specific hypotheses are developed next.

## HYPOTHESES

### Publicly Consumed Luxuries

Products that are observed when being consumed and are also not commonly owned (e.g., golf clubs) fall into



the publicly consumed luxuries category. Such products are exclusive, and this makes them conspicuous and thus susceptible to peer influence. Further, brand decisions regarding such products will be greatly influenced by peers because they are consumed in public. Finally, the public nature of the product will ensure that familial influences are less important. Therefore, since the product is a luxury, peer influence for the product should be strong. Since consumption of the product will be observed by others, peer influence for the brand should be strong. Since the product will be consumed in public, familial influence should be relatively weak, because such influences should predominantly occur for products consumed at home. Hence, intergenerational transfers of brand preferences should generally be low.

### Privately Consumed Luxuries

Products that are not observed by others during the act of consumption and are also not commonly owned (e.g., trash compactors) are categorized as private luxuries. Such products attract high peer influence because they are important and discretionary purchases; the brands purchased are not observable and are thus not as subject to peer influence. Therefore, while the ownership of the product conveys a message about the owner, the private nature of the consumption process hides the particular brand being consumed. Consequently, the private nature of consumption will generate familial influence, and such influences should be stronger in extended families relative to nuclear families because there are a larger number of strong influencers in extended families. Hence, since the product is a luxury, peer influence for the product should be strong. Since consumption of the product will not be observed by others, peer influence for the brand should be weak. Since the product is consumed at home, familial influence on the brand should be strong; this influence should be magnified in the extended family situation because the number and strength of sources of influence on the individual are higher. Consequently, intergenerational transfers of brand preferences should be high in general and should be higher in extended families relative to nuclear families.

### Publicly Consumed Necessities

Products that are observed when being consumed and are also commonly owned (e.g., wristwatches) fall into the publicly consumed necessities category. The decision to purchase such a product is one that likely attracts lower levels of peer influence because virtually everybody owns the product. However, the specific brand decision will likely attract considerable peer influence because the brand will be seen by others and will, therefore, be conspicuous. Once again, because the public nature of consumption will ensure the dominance of

**EXHIBIT 1**  
 COMBINING PUBLIC-PRIVATE AND LUXURY-NECESSITY DIMENSIONS WITH PRODUCT AND BRAND DECISIONS FOR PEER AND FAMILIAL INFLUENCES

Reference group	Public	Private
<b>Luxury:</b>		
Peer	Strong product influence Strong brand influence	Strong product influence Weak brand influence
Familial	Weak influence	Strong nuclear family influence Very strong extended family influence
<b>Necessity:</b>		
Peer	Weak product influence Strong brand influence	Weak product influence Weak brand influence
Familial	Weak influence	Strong nuclear family influence Very strong extended family influence

publicly based rather than privately based influences, familial influences on the brand should not be manifested. Therefore, since the product is a necessity, peer influence for the product should be weak. Since consumption of the product will be observed by others, peer influence for the brand should be strong. Since the product will be consumed in public, familial influence should be weak, because such influences should predominantly occur for products consumed at home. Hence, intergenerational transfers of brand preferences should be relatively low.

### Privately Consumed Necessities

Products that are neither observable nor exclusive because they are consumed out of public view and are used by everybody (e.g., mattresses) fall into the privately consumed necessities category. Such products and brands are not socially relevant and are therefore not likely to be influenced by peers. Because they are consumed in private, the influence of the family is expected to be relatively high; this strength is expected to be magnified in extended families in which there are a greater number of strong sources of influence on the individual. Therefore, since the product is a necessity, peer influence for the product should be weak. Since consumption of the product will not be observed by others, peer influence for the brand should be weak. Since the product is consumed at home, familial influence on the brand should be strong; this influence should be magnified in extended family situations because the number and strength of sources of influence on the individual are higher. Consequently, intergenerational transfer of brand preferences should be high in general and should be higher in extended families relative to nuclear families.

The relationships developed here suggest an amendment to Bearden and Etzel's (1982) conceptualization as shown in Exhibit 1.

## Summary of Expected Relationships

The anticipated relationships are summarized below and presented in a fashion similar to Bearden and Etzel (1982). The first six hypotheses refer to the influence of friends, co-workers, and other peers on product decisions, while the second set of six hypotheses refers to the influence of the same referents on brand decisions. Finally, the last set of eight relationships refers to the influence of the family (intergenerational influences) on brand decisions alone. While Hypotheses 13–18 relate to the public-private and luxury-necessity classifications, Hypotheses 19 and 20 make specific predictions about family type, reflecting the greater anticipated influence of extended families on intergenerational transfer of brand loyalties for certain product categories.

### *Peer Influence on Product Decisions.*

- H1: Public luxury > public necessity.
- H2: Public luxury = private luxury.
- H3: Public luxury > private necessity.
- H4: Public necessity < private luxury.
- H5: Public necessity = private necessity.
- H6: Private luxury > private necessity.

### *Peer Influence on Brand Decisions.*

- H7: Public luxury = public necessity.
- H8: Public luxury > private luxury.
- H9: Public luxury > private necessity.
- H10: Public necessity > private luxury.
- H11: Public necessity > private necessity.
- H12: Private luxury = private necessity.

### *Familial Influence on Brand Decisions.*

- H13: Private necessity > public luxury.
- H14: Private necessity > public necessity.
- H15: Private luxury > public luxury.
- H16: Private luxury > public necessity.
- H17: Private necessity = private luxury.
- H18: Public necessity = public luxury.
- H19: Private luxury (extended family) > private luxury (nuclear family).
- H20: Private necessity (extended family) > private necessity (nuclear family).

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

A 2 (family type) × 2 (public vs. private) × 2 (luxury vs. necessity) three-factor design was utilized in which

family type (i.e., country) was a between-subjects factor, while public versus private and luxury versus necessity were within-subjects factors.

*Independent Variables.* To operationalize family type, we elected to use subjects from the United States, who would likely be more representative of nuclear families, and Thailand, who would likely be more representative of extended families. For the operationalization of the public-private and luxury-necessity factors in the U.S. sample we chose the same set of products used by Bearden and Etzel (1982), while for the Thai sample we generated a unique set of products, as will be described later.

The choice of Thailand as an alternative setting was determined by numerous factors. First, Thailand represents a culture with a relatively strong extended-family orientation (Kunstadter 1985; Tremblay 1990). Further, as noted by Suvannathat (1979), some primary values of Thai society are gratitude, obedience, and respect for authority and seniority, and these values are largely imparted through the family by means of teaching, preaching, and example. Second, Thailand was never colonized by the British and is therefore culturally less “contaminated” by Western mores and influences that may possibly have an impact on sociologically driven consumption behavior. For instance, the relative absence of Western cultural values allows for greater adherence to indigenous cultural values, such as unquestioning respect for elders, unquestioning public homage to Buddhist priests, and so on. Third, the presence of a free-market economy and the relative absence of import restrictions allow for the availability of a multitude of products and brands; such a circumstance facilitated study of the relationships of interest in this research. Fourth, one of the authors was a visiting faculty member at a major Thai university and had access to a pool of subjects comprising current and past M.B.A. students. Therefore, it appeared reasonable to test the theoretical predictions using a Thai sample, which, in turn, provided a means of operationalizing the extended family notion.<sup>4</sup>

*Dependent Variables.* The first dependent measure was a modified version of the reference-group-influence scale (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Park and Lessig 1977). The modification reflected our interest in peer-based reference groups, as opposed to reference groups in general. Subjects were asked about the influence of referents such as co-workers, friends, neighbors, professional organizations, business or social clubs, and school classmates and were explicitly asked not to consider the

<sup>4</sup>The use of samples from the United States and Thailand represents an attempt to manipulate the theoretical construct family type. Note that it is not our attempt to generalize about the U.S. and Thai populations; rather, we are simply using an a priori expectation regarding family types in the two nations to operationalize a theoretical construct of interest.

influence of family members. A six-point bipolar agree-disagree scale that included four informational items and five items for each of the value-expressive and utilitarian components from the Bearden and Etzel scale was used. For subsequent manipulation-check purposes, two items on the final survey that used the identical six-point scale requested respondents to rate the test products on the degree to which they were public or private and the degree to which they were a luxury or a necessity.

To measure parental influence, the intergenerational transfer of brand loyalties was coded as a binary response variable (1 = purchased the same brand that parents purchased, 0 = purchased a different brand than parents purchased, do not know, do not buy or own this product, or parents do not buy or own this product) and subsequently analyzed with logistic regression procedures. Multiple-item responses for this variable were not solicited because subjects were already providing multiple-item responses for reference-group influence for four products and brands (as will be described below). This involved a considerable amount of time on the part of the respondent, and a request for responses on an additional set of 13 items for intergenerational transfer for four products would likely have resulted in respondent fatigue and attenuated our response rate to an unacceptable level.

## Sample

Thai and U.S. subjects were alumni of M.B.A. programs of major Thai and U.S. universities, respectively. Subjects were randomly selected from the two alumni mailing lists, and the questionnaires were mailed and followed with a reminder postcard a week later. The medium of instruction at the Thai university was English, so students were fluent in written and spoken English; therefore, experimental material did not require any translation. In general, given the commonality in educational backgrounds, it appeared that the two samples were comparable on dimensions other than cultural background.

## Method

The 16 products for the Thai sample (reduced from an original list of 67 products through a pretest conducted in Thailand) differed from the 16 used in the U.S. context. This difference is consistent with the notion that luxuries (vs. necessities) and publicly consumed products (vs. privately consumed products) are likely to be specific to the culture and sample, thus varying from country to country. For instance, while refrigerators may be considered a necessity in Australia, they may be considered a luxury in India. On the basis of pretests and manipulation checks, it was concluded that subjects perceived all products as intended. All differences on the public-private (2.1 vs. 4.7 for the U.S.

sample; 3.0 vs. 4.1 for the Thai sample) and the luxury-necessity (1.9 vs. 4.8 for the U.S. sample; 2.6 vs. 4.7 for the Thai sample) scores on Bearden and Etzel's (1982, p. 186) scale were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

In an attempt to avoid subject fatigue, we created four groups of products, each comprising one public luxury, one public necessity, one private luxury, and one private necessity (Bearden and Etzel 1982). Thus, each subject provided responses for product and brand decisions for four different products and also responded to the intergenerational brand-loyalty measure. The order of presentation of product categories was counter-balanced across the questionnaires to control for order bias. The configurations associated with each product category for each country are provided in Exhibit 2.

Of the 686 total questionnaires mailed out to the U.S. sample, 196 were returned by a prespecified cutoff date, generating a 29 percent response rate. For the Thai sample, 310 questionnaires were mailed out and 149 were returned by a prespecified cutoff date, generating a 48 percent response rate. American respondents had an average age of 34.35 years and a median annual family income of \$63,201; 48 percent were women and 33 percent had parents living in the same city. Thai respondents had an average age of 34.26 years and a median income of \$26,343; 36 percent were women and 76 percent had parents living in the same city.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

*Reliability Estimates.* A reliability of linear combinations (Nunnally 1978, p. 247) for product and brand decisions was computed for the group-influence scale at the component level (informational,  $\alpha = .77$  and  $.72$ ; utilitarian,  $\alpha = .91$  and  $.91$ ; and value expressive,  $\alpha = .90$  and  $.92$ , respectively); for the overall scale,  $\alpha$  was  $.93$  for both product and brand decisions. Further, the reliability values for both the U.S. and Thai samples appear to be consistent, lending support to our decision to use the experimental material without translation.

*Manipulation Check for Family Type.* A proportions test of the number of nonimmediate family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles) living at the same residence was performed and found to be significant ( $p < .0001$ ), suggesting that Thai subjects came from relatively extended families and U.S. subjects came from relatively nuclear families. Not only do more Thai families have nonimmediate family members living in the same common residence (68.5 percent vs. 9.7 percent for the Thai and U.S. samples, respectively), but the range of nonimmediate family members tends to be greater (a range of 1–15 vs. 1–3 for the Thai and U.S. samples, respectively). Finally, the number of individuals residing together in Thailand (3.81) was significantly larger than the number of individuals residing together in the United States (1.77;  $p < .01$ ).



**EXHIBIT 2**  
LAYOUT OF RESEARCH DESIGN

	Luxury	Necessity
United States:		
Group 1 ( <i>n</i> = 44):		
Public	PUL (golf clubs)	PUN (man's suit)
Private	PRL (pool table)	PRN (refrigerator)
Group 2 ( <i>n</i> = 57):		
Public	PUL (tennis racquet)	PUN (wristwatch)
Private	PRL (video game)	PRN (lamp)
Group 3 ( <i>n</i> = 52):		
Public	PUL (snow skis)	PUN (automobile)
Private	PRL (ice maker)	PRN (mattress)
Group 4 ( <i>n</i> = 43):		
Public	PUL (sailboat)	PUN (woman's dress)
Private	PRL (trash compactor)	PRN (blanket)
Thailand:		
Group 5 ( <i>n</i> = 31):		
Public	PUL (portable CD player)	PUN (pen)
Private	PRL (washing machine)	PRN (rice cooker)
Group 6 ( <i>n</i> = 36):		
Public	PUL (35-mm camera)	PUN (woman's blouse)
Private	PRL (cordless phone)	PRN (refrigerator)
Group 7 ( <i>n</i> = 43):		
Public	PUL (Scotch whiskey)	PUN (wristwatch)
Private	PRL (microwave oven)	PRN (lamp)
Group 8 ( <i>n</i> = 39):		
Public	PUL (tennis racquet)	PUN (man's pants)
Private	PRL (VCR)	PRN (toothpaste)

NOTE.—PUL, public luxury; PUN, public necessity; PRL, private luxury; PRN, private necessity.

Our manipulation check was limited to family size as an indicator of whether the respondent came from an extended or a nuclear family. Clearly, numerous other cultural, attitudinal, and structural characteristics would be indicative of family type. Nevertheless, consistent with standard experimental consumer research, evidence from variations in family size and the theoretical differences between Thai and U.S. cultures suggest that family type differed in the two countries as proposed.

## Results

The analyses performed on the data included repeated-measures multivariate analyses of variance

(MANOVA), univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA), and between-cells means tests for peer-influence effects, as well as logit analysis and between-cells proportions tests for intergenerational influence effects. For the multivariate analysis, we examined the impact of the independent variables on each component of peer influence (average of items within a subscale; see Table 1). In the ANOVAs, we collapsed the three components of peer influence into one measure, essentially because our hypotheses do not specify differences with regard to each component of peer influence (Table 2). This procedure, and subsequent comparisons between means, allows for a more straightforward presentation of key findings. In Table 2, we also provide effect sizes ( $\eta^2$ ) for significant results for ANOVA and logit analyses.

The overall MANOVA results are significant and indicate differences in patterns of external-reference-group influence depending on the component under consideration, in a manner consistent with Bearden and Etzel (1982). The ANOVA and logit analyses indicate that there are no significant three-way interaction effects among the country, luxury-necessity, and public-private factors on brand decisions. However, this three-way interaction effect approached statistical significance for peer influence on product decisions ( $p < .066$ ). Therefore, consistent with standard statistical procedures, the three-way interaction term for the brand decision was removed from the model and the analysis was rerun. Because the nonsignificant interaction term is now pooled with the error term, greater degrees of freedom are provided for the error term, resulting in a more powerful test of the remaining effects. For expository convenience, effect sizes from this second analysis are presented in Table 3. All main and interaction terms (except the country  $\times$  luxury-necessity interaction) are significant for both product and brand decisions. The significant two-way interactions are further discussed in a later section.

*Tests of Hypotheses for Peer Group Influence.* To examine the presence of support for the anticipated relationships, the mean values of reference-group influence for appropriate product categories were compared. In all cases in which directional effects were hypothesized, one-tailed tests were conducted. The results of these analyses are available in Table 3.<sup>5</sup>

For product decisions, only Hypotheses 2 and 3 received unequivocal support. Hypotheses 1 and 4 were not supported from a statistical significance standpoint, while for Hypothesis 5 a statistically significant difference in means was unexpectedly observed. Finally, for Hypothesis 6, marginal support was observed. For brand

<sup>5</sup>Because a presentation of results for each component of reference-group influence would be overwhelming, we simply present the results at the composite level for the overall sample. Interested readers may contact the authors for these and country-wise, component-wise analyses, discussed below.



**TABLE 1**  
MANOVA RESULTS FOR PEER GROUP INFLUENCE

Source	Overall (df = 1)		Informational (df = 1)		Utilitarian (df = 1)		Value expressive (df = 1)	
	F	p	F	p	F	p	F	p
<b>Product decision:</b>								
Country (A)	5.72	.001	.24	.628	15.48	.000	16.12	.000
Luxury (B)	102.68	.000	302.04	.000	39.14	.000	24.74	.000
Public (C)	179.54	.000	.66	.418	352.34	.000	518.15	.000
A × B	8.42	.000	.01	.915	7.41	.007	.55	.459
A × C	43.92	.000	113.87	.000	44.90	.000	42.36	.000
B × C	16.79	.000	2.35	.126	42.29	.000	34.90	.000
A × B × C	2.88	.036	.03	.859	.43	.512	5.77	.017
<b>Brand decision:</b>								
Country (A)	11.50	.000	.05	.828	30.99	.000	24.69	.000
Luxury (B)	89.36	.000	247.87	.000	13.92	.000	.01	.918
Public (C)	254.79	.000	10.17	.002	531.61	.000	749.25	.000
A × B	2.81	.04	2.46	.118	4.39	.037	.14	.708
A × C	50.62	.000	129.17	.000	64.61	.000	58.79	.000
B × C	32.18	.000	6.82	.009	59.52	.000	90.22	.000
A × B × C	4.69	.003	.38	.540	1.60	.208	1.61	.206

decisions, however, every hypothesized relationship (Hypothesis 7–12) was supported. In sum, therefore, five of the eight unequal hypothesized comparisons were supported while three of the four equal hypothesized comparisons were supported.

In general, our component-wise results mirror those of Bearden and Etzel (1982), including the direction of the relationships that they found to be contrary to their expectations. Our statistical significance was not as strong, however; 19 of 36 possible comparisons were supported. Further, while brand decisions generally occurred in the hypothesized direction for the U.S. subjects, only three of six brand decisions were in the hypothesized direction for Thai subjects. For product decisions, influences occurred in the hypothesized manner only for Hypothesis 3 for the U.S. sample while Hypotheses 2, 3, and 6 were supported for the Thai sample.

To assess the degree to which Bearden and Etzel’s results are still valid, a component-level examination of peer influence for the U.S. sample alone was undertaken and revealed that there is not a single relationship for which our results significantly differed from Bearden and Etzel’s theoretical predictions *and* empirical results. It therefore appears reasonable to conclude that the basic theoretical argument has stood the test of time.

An examination of component-wise results on the Thai sample provides a sense of the degree to which the theoretical argument is valid in a different cultural context. Again, there is not a single relationship for which our results differed from the theoretical predictions *and* empirical results of Bearden and Etzel. It therefore appears reasonable to conclude that the basic theoretical argument holds in Thailand as well as in the United States.

In Figure 1 (panels *a* and *b*), the two significant two-way interaction terms for reference-group influence are graphed. Peer influence is substantially higher for public versus private necessities ( $p < .05$ ); this relationship is not as pronounced for public versus private luxuries. This finding suggests that, for luxuries, peers provide a relatively uniform level of influence, regardless of public or private consumption. Thus, the degree to which the product is a *luxury* appears to be the driving force behind the manifestation of peer influence.

For the interaction between country and the public-private factor, a distinct crossover interaction is observed, which suggests that there is not much difference in peer influence for public versus private products in Thailand, whereas in the United States decisions regarding publicly consumed products are subject to more peer influence than decisions regarding private products ( $p < .08$ ). The relative size of the immediate nuclear family for U.S. respondents is low, and perhaps therefore the influence of peers is relatively high; this is not so for our Thai respondents.

An examination of the observed interactions for brand decisions (Fig. 1, panels *c* and *d*) indicates a very similar pattern of peer influence. While public necessities attract significantly greater influence than private necessities ( $p < .05$ ), this difference is not as marked for luxuries. Further, the difference between such influence for public versus private products in Thailand is relatively less pronounced than the difference between such influence for public versus private products in the United States ( $p < .05$ ).

*Tests of Hypotheses for Familial Influence.* To assess support for the intergenerational influence hypotheses (Table 4), proportions tests were performed

**TABLE 2**  
EFFECT SIZE ESTIMATES ( $\eta^2$ ) FOR SIGNIFICANT  
RELATIONSHIPS

Effect	External reference-group influence <sup>a</sup>		Intergenerational influence <sup>b</sup> on brand decision
	Product decision	Brand decision	
Country (A)	.04	.06	.02
Luxury (B)	.33	.15	.01
Private (C)	.54	.63	...
A × B	...	...	.01
A × C	.21	.25	.01
B × C	.13	.20	.01
A × B × C	.01	...	...

NOTE.—All reported effects are significant at  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>a</sup>Data are from ANOVA tables.

<sup>b</sup>Data are from logit analysis.

on the percentage of subjects indicating that they had bought the same brand of product as their parents.<sup>6</sup> Four of the eight predicted relationships were significant ( $p < .05$ ). Private necessities attracted greater intergenerational influence than did public necessities. Further, public necessities and public luxuries generated similar amounts of intergenerational influence. The degree to which private products (both luxuries and necessities) attracted intergenerational influence was significantly higher in Thailand than it was in the United States. The only other significant (and unexpected) finding was that private necessities attracted greater intergenerational influence than private luxuries did; it was hypothesized that these product types would attract the same (strong) amount of intergenerational influence. It appears that there is equivocal support for the direct applicability of reference-group theory to the study of intergenerational influences.

Finally, the three significant two-way interactions of intergenerational influence are graphed in Figure 2 (panels *a*, *b*, and *c*). There is a statistically significant difference in influence between private necessities and luxuries ( $p < .05$ ), while there is no statistically significant difference for the same comparison for public products (Fig. 2, panel *a*). Clearly, for products that are consumed at home, the influence of parents on brand choice is marked, perhaps because of the limited opportunity to observe the brand preferences of peers. In Figure 2, panel *b*, it appears that a relatively high degree of intergenerational influence exists in Thailand for both luxuries and necessities while in the United States intergenerational influence is significantly more marked for necessities than for luxuries ( $p < .05$ ). Finally, from Figure 2, panel *c*, it appears that intergenerational in-

fluence is relatively uniformly exercised for both public and private products in Thailand while in the United States there is a marginally larger intergenerational influence for private relative to public products ( $p < .10$ ). Both of these findings reflect the relatively strong influence of family members in an extended family. Thai respondents are clearly influenced more by parents and other family members than by peers, and we suspect that these effects will be even more pronounced among rural, conservative, and less upscale Thai people. A more substantive interpretation of these findings is presented in the Discussion.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary

The purpose of this research was to replicate and extend a study that examined reference-group influence on individuals' product and brand purchase decisions (Bearden and Etzel 1982). In the current study, a distinction was made between peers and family members. On the basis of the product categorization first suggested by Bourne (1957), the influence of these two types of reference groups was expected to vary across product and brand purchase decisions depending on whether the product was publicly or privately consumed or considered a luxury or a necessity. Peer group influence and intergenerational transfer of brand loyalty were measured for subjects in the United States and in Thailand. The premise of this research was that, for decisions that were not influenced by peers, the family would exercise an influence and that these influences would vary across the two family types.

### Evaluation of Replication and Extension Effort

The results of this research are evaluated from the standpoint of the three objectives identified initially.<sup>7</sup> First, the results of this study essentially replicate those of Bearden and Etzel over time. While statistically not as strong, our effects tended to be larger, perhaps because of our focus on peer versus familial influence as opposed to a generalized notion of reference-group influence; none of the relationships were contradictory to those of Bearden and Etzel's theory and empirical findings. Second, the results from the Thai sample suggest support for the theoretical rationale in a markedly different culture. Once again, our results mirror those of Bearden and Etzel to a remarkable degree; for every relationship, we are in agreement with either their pre-

<sup>6</sup>This approach is the most conservative of a variety of approaches considered, from conceptual as well as analytical standpoints.

<sup>7</sup>Our decision to not discuss specific hypothesis-by-hypothesis findings but to present a general discussion is driven by two considerations. First, a discussion of each of the 20 hypotheses would be overwhelming. Second, our principal concern is with the general applicability of the theoretical approach; this will likely be achieved quite readily through the general discussion that follows.

**TABLE 3**  
 PAIRED COMPARISON HYPOTHESES AND RESULTS FOR PEER GROUP INFLUENCE

Hypothesis	Overall	United States	Thailand
<b>Products:<sup>a</sup></b>			
H1: PUL > PUN	4.014 vs. 3.731	4.096 vs. 3.779	3.915 vs. 3.674
H2: PUL = PRL	4.014 vs. 3.354	4.096 vs. 2.984 <sup>b</sup>	3.915 vs. 3.801
H3: PUL > PRN	4.014 vs. 2.575 <sup>b</sup>	4.096 vs. 2.291 <sup>b</sup>	3.915 vs. 2.917 <sup>b</sup>
H4: PUN < PRL	3.731 vs. 3.354	3.779 vs. 2.984	3.674 vs. 3.801
H5: PUN = PRN	3.731 vs. 2.575 <sup>b</sup>	3.779 vs. 2.291 <sup>b</sup>	3.674 vs. 2.917
H6: PRL > PRN	3.354 vs. 2.575	2.984 vs. 2.291	3.801 vs. 2.917 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Brands:<sup>c</sup></b>			
H7: PUL = PUN	4.398 vs. 4.385	4.433 vs. 4.462	4.354 vs. 4.286
H8: PUL > PRL	4.398 vs. 3.576 <sup>b</sup>	4.433 vs. 3.177 <sup>b</sup>	4.354 vs. 4.092
H9: PUL > PRN	4.398 vs. 3.013 <sup>b</sup>	4.433 vs. 2.676 <sup>b</sup>	4.354 vs. 3.448 <sup>b</sup>
H10: PUN > PRL	4.385 vs. 3.576 <sup>b</sup>	4.462 vs. 3.177 <sup>b</sup>	4.286 vs. 4.092
H11: PUN > PRN	4.385 vs. 3.013 <sup>b</sup>	4.462 vs. 2.676 <sup>b</sup>	4.286 vs. 3.448 <sup>b</sup>
H12: PRL = PRN	3.576 vs. 3.013	3.177 vs. 2.676	4.092 vs. 3.448 <sup>b</sup>

NOTE.—Figures are mean scores; PUL, public luxury; PUN, public necessity; PRL, private luxury; PRN, private necessity.

<sup>a</sup>Mean square error (MSE) = .416.

<sup>b</sup>Difference between pairs is significant at  $p < .05$  or better.

<sup>c</sup>MSE = .299.

diction or their findings. Third, on the basis of the observed differences in familial influence in Thailand and the United States, there appears to be sufficient reason to pursue the examination of intergenerational influences on product and brand decisions in future research. Further, the observed interactions appear to be interesting and support the basic theoretical argument.

It is interesting that three relationships that Bearden and Etzel found to be in a direction opposite to that hypothesized (and significantly so) were observed in this study as well. For product decisions, the influence of peers appears to be *greater* for private luxuries than for public necessities for the value-expressive and informational components of the scale. Similarly, for brand decisions, the informational component of the scale generates a stronger effect for private luxuries than for public necessities. It is curious that all three opposite findings apply to the private luxury and public necessity comparison. Perhaps the luxury element in the product ensures that peers exert a strong influence, because the relatively high price and associated perceived risk necessitate reliance on such reference groups.

### Substantive Advances

Beyond the overall assessment of support for Bearden and Etzel's (1982) study, does the consideration of two types of reference groups contribute to an enhanced understanding of some facet of consumer behavior? Further, are there any other substantive insights to be gained from an examination of the observed interactions? These two issues are addressed in tandem here.

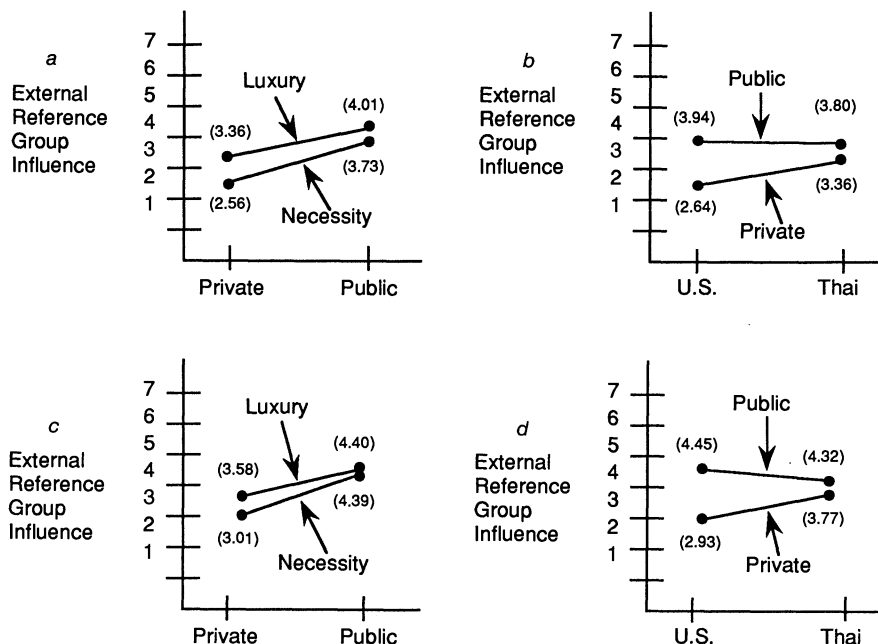
The interactions observed between country and public and private consumption for product and brand decisions indicate that there are differences in peer influ-

ence across family type (Fig. 1, panels *b* and *d*). In nuclear families, the degree to which an individual is influenced by peers appears to be significantly higher for public than for private products and brands, while this is not the case in extended families. This likely occurs because, in nuclear families, the number of immediate family members and their importance to the individual is limited, while in extended families there are numerous important family members available to exercise an influence on the individuals' decision making. Consequently, the influence of referents other than family members is relatively less powerful in extended families. Conversely, in nuclear families, the individual is subjected to family-based influences essentially for private products (and necessities) as indicated by the interactions for intergenerational influence (Fig. 2, panels *b* and *c*). Apparently, the relatively high degree of peer-based influence in the United States is manifested for decisions that are conspicuous. On the other hand, for Thai subjects, the relatively larger number and variety of family members generate relatively strong influences, which then reduce the influence of peers. Specifically, the presence of numerous uncles, aunts, cousins, and the like perhaps creates a family-based identity similar to that observed among first-generation Italian immigrants to the United States.

The notion of intergenerational influences was introduced in this article as an alternative manifestation of reference-group influence. Operationally, the intergenerational transfer of brand loyalty was measured by whether the individual purchased the same brand as a parent did. Apparently, private necessities attract the greatest amount of intergenerational transfer, because it is not as possible for other referents to influence decisions for relatively inconspicuous products. Clearly,

FIGURE 1

## PEER GROUP INTERACTIONS



NOTE.—a, Luxury/necessity (LN) × private/public (PP) for product decisions; b, PP × country for product decisions; c, LN × PP for brand decisions; d, PP × country for brand decisions.

parents (and other “senior members” in the extended family) serve as role models for the purchase of products in certain categories. Further, the distinction between necessities and luxuries is seemingly not as pronounced for Thai families as it is for U.S. families. Perhaps in Thailand, because of the relatively traditional family structure, even while purchasing socially conspicuous products, the brand purchased by one’s parent exerts a strong influence; this does not occur to the same degree in nontraditional families, such as those found in the United States. Finally, the distinction between private and public consumption is seemingly not as pronounced for extended families as it is for nuclear families. Perhaps the presence of a large number of family members in the same residence results in all consumption appearing to be of a relatively public nature. In contrast, the location of the consumption does greatly affect the source on which U.S. respondents rely, because the potential social consequences of owning the “wrong” brand are likely to be decidedly more negative. In Thailand, however, owning the same brand as one’s parent is less likely to be considered a social *faux pas*, because the older generation is traditionally accorded a great deal of respect. In essence, both these findings demonstrate the relatively large influence of peers for public products and luxuries. For private products and for necessities, which are less conspicuous, the influence of peers is considerably reduced, and thus the family begins

to exercise greater influence on individuals’ decision making.

It was unexpectedly observed that private necessities were subject to considerably greater intergenerational transfer than were private luxuries (Hypothesis 17). Clearly, private luxuries (such as trash compactors or washing machines) are important and expensive (or at least more discretionary) products and are more likely to say something about the individual than a private necessity (such as a lamp or toothpaste) would. Consequently, the influence of peers is likely to be somewhat higher for luxuries in general. Similarly, the influence of the family will likely be higher for necessities. Therefore, the finding that intergenerational transfer is greater for private necessities than it is for private luxuries is consistent with the basic theoretical approach and is also consistent with an earlier observation regarding the importance of the luxury factor in driving reference-group influence.

### Limitations and Future Research

The relatively low reliability associated with the informational component of the scale may have contributed to the nonsignificance of numerous directionally correct findings, given that low reliability values tend to attenuate relationships and thus reduce statistical



**TABLE 4**  
 PAIRED COMPARISON HYPOTHESES AND RESULTS  
 FOR FAMILIAL INFLUENCE

Hypothesis	Intergenerational brand transfer
H13: PRN > PUL	22.2 vs. 14.8
H14: PRN > PUN	22.2 vs. 16.2 <sup>a</sup>
H15: PRL > PUL	11.4 <sup>b</sup> vs. 14.8 <sup>b</sup>
H16: PRL > PUN	11.4 <sup>b</sup> vs. 16.2 <sup>b</sup>
H17: PRN = PRL	22.2 vs. 11.4 <sup>a</sup>
H18: PUN = PUL	16.1 vs. 14.8
H19: PRL <sub>e</sub> > PRL <sub>n</sub>	18.9 vs. 1.7 <sup>a</sup>
H20: PRN <sub>e</sub> > PRN <sub>n</sub>	30.8 vs. 12.2 <sup>a</sup>

NOTE.—Data are proportions. Subscripts refer to family type: e, extended; n, nuclear. Other abbreviations are same as in Table 3.

<sup>a</sup>Difference between pairs is significant at  $p < .05$  or better.

<sup>b</sup>Pairs represent nonequal hypotheses that are counter to expected direction.

significance.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while there is a clear need for improved measures of reference-group influence, the hypothesized relationships do consistently appear.<sup>9</sup>

A second, more conceptual limitation needs elaboration. As Bearden and Etzel note (p. 189), “The fact that three types of reference group influences were measured does not imply that all three should be present or absent in an individual case. In fact, it would seem reasonable to find one type of influence operating and the others absent in a particular situation. For example, in the purchase of a man’s suit, value-expressive influence might play a much larger role than either informational or utilitarian influence.” Given the apparent robustness of the theoretical approach, arguments regarding the differential influence of the normative and informational components of influence need to be developed. Specifically, it would be interesting to understand whether normative and informational influences differ among different types of referents.

Several issues of methodological as well as substantive interest emerge from the intergenerational aspect of this research. First, this study employed a single behavioral indicator of brand preferences for reasons noted earlier. Given the strength of relationships observed for intergenerational brand preferences, additional work seems warranted to develop a broader and psychometrically more assessable set of indicators. These could include attitudinally based indicators of preference, as well as measures of intergenerational transmission for social norms, cultural and personal values, sex-role perceptions, and consumer skills. All these indicators may in-

<sup>8</sup>However, Bearden and Etzel found significant relationships despite the low reliability values obtained for the informational component of their reference-group-influence scale, perhaps because of their relatively larger sample size.

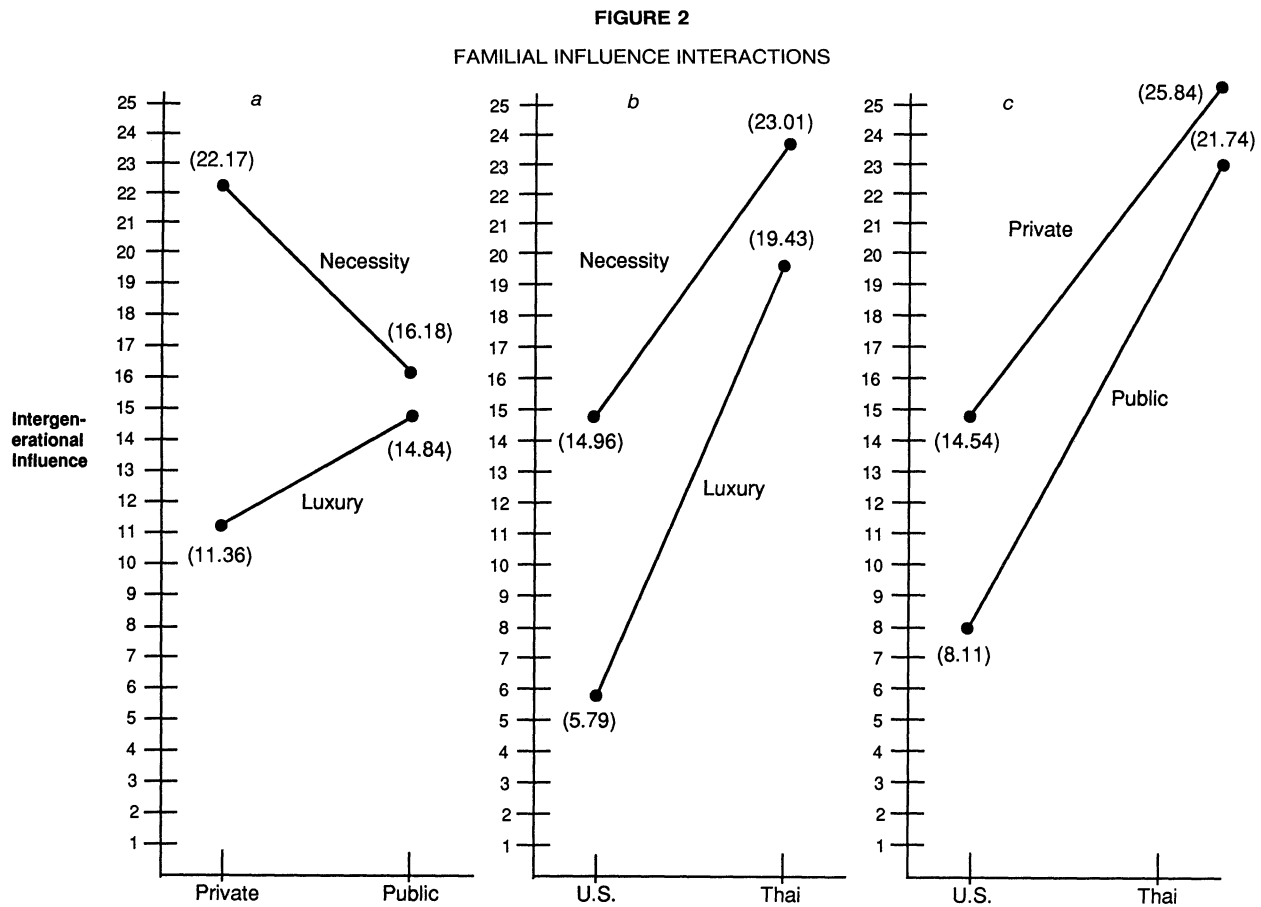
<sup>9</sup>It is encouraging to note that Bearden et al. (1989, p. 477) report an  $\alpha$  of .83 and .82 for the informational component of a slightly modified and a more general scale of susceptibility to interpersonal influence, respectively.

fluence purchase behavior and may also depend on the individual’s family structure.

Second, this study found intergenerational influence to be an important determinant of brand preferences, but we know little about the source of this effect, particularly for extended versus nuclear families. One basis for this influence may be the greater number of family members present under an extended structure, which should increase the *opportunity* for brand preferences to be observed and communicated. However, whether it is the sheer number of family members present, or the progeny’s *willingness* to adopt family preferences because of the importance accorded these extended family members, or some combination of these factors is an issue worthy of further exploration. Clearly, the cognitive processes underlying these influences would also be a worthwhile avenue for future research.

Third, this study examined family type in only two different cultures. The extended family orientation was based on a study of Thai purchase behavior and, in this context, was weighted toward the more cosmopolitan segment of Bangkok consumers. Although the results were informative, we need to extend the scope to other cultures as well. Arnould’s (1989) recent work on the Niger culture underscores our need to broaden our consumer-behavior perspectives. Even though Niger reflects more of an extended-family orientation, Arnould’s description of family interactions indicates that extended-family influences may be different from those observed in Thailand. While values for conformity and social integration appear to be common across these two cultures, Niger appears to utilize the services of consumer surrogates (male kinsmen and “market mavens”), and older persons, although still involved, play a subordinate role in consumption decisions (Arnould 1989). On the other hand, through rituals such as marriage ceremonies, peers appear to be an influential basis of preference formation. Further, recent work by Mehta and Belk (1991) provides insight as to the possible nature of intergenerational influence for Indian immigrants. They report that Indian immigrants to the United States maintain a connection to the homeland through the artifacts they display in their homes while they also adapt their purchase behavior for goods that are more external and public to assure career and community acceptance. Thus, intergenerational influences may be present for Indian immigrants’ private consumption, but external referents from a different culture (United States) affect public-based consumption behavior. Mehta and Belk’s results are generally consistent with those reported in the present study, but the nature and source of the influences may differ because of the cultural specificity of the Indian immigrant’s familial versus peer-based reference groups.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine the influence of other types of referents on the individual’s consumption behavior. Two such groups are distant referents, such as aspirational figures (sports heroes,



NOTE.—a, Luxury/necessity by public/private; b, Luxury/necessity by country; c, Public/private by country.

entertainment figures, etc.), and progeny, that is, children who exercise a reverse intergenerational influence on their parents. These types of influence are likely to vary across product categories, and our theoretical approach should be appropriate for addressing these issues.

### Implications and Conclusions

The implications of this research are of significance for purveyors of public information and for scholars of consumer behavior. The former group would be well advised to consider the consumption circumstances and the family structure of their segment before deciding whether to use a spokesperson who represents the individual's peer referent. In some circumstances, the use of a spokesperson may be appropriate, whereas in others it may not. In particular, the attempt to use a peerlike referent to promote private necessities will probably not be successful.

Recent qualitative research on the issue of celebrity spokespeople (McCracken 1989) illustrates the meaning that celebrities often impart to products and brands. While not addressed in this research, it clearly would

be of interest to assess whether respondents attach any meaning to products that fall into the four categories and whether these meanings are related to reference-group members (e.g., "Dad's cologne" or "Arnold Palmer's golf clubs"). Such an examination may yield some insights regarding the type and personality of the spokesperson to use for product endorsements. In fact, one conclusion may be to change the reference-group-related image of the product (e.g., "This is not your father's Oldsmobile"). Clearly, ethnographic research that focuses on consumption circumstances and product symbolism would yield interesting insights.

The contributions of this article to the literature on sociological influencers of consumption behavior are twofold. First, the replication effort appears to support the basic theoretical premise. Second, the addition of the twin notions of intergenerational influence and comparison in another culture adds conceptual and empirical richness to the theoretical argument. Such international examinations of theory that is based in the United States have recently begun to receive scrutiny in consumer behavior (e.g., Arnould 1989). That consumers would differ in the degree to which they are

influenced by referents while making product and brand consumption decisions is an interesting finding. That this logic applies to a global notion of referents that includes parents, whose influence on the individual is different from that of other referents, suggests that a closer scrutiny of the reference-group construct is in order.

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