

From Labeling Possessions to Possessing Labels: Ridicule and Socialization among Adolescents

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This research explores ridicule as a mechanism through which adolescents exchange information about consumption norms and values. The author finds that adolescents use ridicule to ostracize, haze, or admonish peers who violate consumption norms. Targets and observers learn stereotypes about avoidance groups, consumption norms of aspirational groups, the use of possessions to communicate social linkages and achieve acceptance goals, and social consequences of nonconformity. As a result, many targets and observers of ridicule alter their perceptions, acquisition, use, and disposition of objects in order to avoid unwanted attention.

Despite increased attention to the stages and processes involved as children acquire consumer and marketplace information (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Moore 1979), important aspects of consumer socialization have been neglected (John 1999). For instance, social scientists posit a prominent role for social environment in socialization processes, but consumer researchers seldom examine how social surroundings and experiences contribute to consumer socialization (John 1999). Efforts to understand the relative impact of socialization agents highlight the emergence of peers as dominant influences as children mature and parental influence wanes (Ward 1974). However, surprisingly few studies have probed the nature of these influences (John 1999), especially means by which peers exert their influence.

A deeper understanding of peer influences on consumer socialization is needed not only because of how much adolescents learn from peers but also because of what they learn from peer interactions. Frequent interaction with peers coincides with high levels of materialism and strong social

motives for consuming (Moschis and Churchill 1978). Media reports cite materialism as a cause of theft, violence, and drug trafficking by teens who covet expensive items (Fields 1993). These disturbing findings are insufficient to establish peer influence as a cause of materialism and lawlessness, but they raise questions about the messages adolescents receive from peers and the means by which these messages are disseminated.

I attempt to address these questions by exploring ridicule as a mechanism through which adolescents learn, sometimes painfully, about consumption practices deemed unacceptable to influential others. An examination of ridicule as a mechanism for socialization into adolescence is warranted by the pervasiveness of teasing among adolescents (Shapiro, Baumeister, and Kessler 1991) and its effects on learning and behavior in general (Buss 1980). Moreover, the content of ridicule often includes inferences about the types of people who commit designated missteps (Shapiro et al. 1991), whereas the process often involves efforts to construct, negotiate, and disseminate interpretations of laughable occurrences (Danesi 1994). Therefore, explorations of ridicule can potentially contribute to knowledge of processes by which associations between objects and identities evolve (Belk 1988; Solomon 1983). In this article, I explore the nature of ridicule among adolescents, its effects on learning about consumption norms and values, and its impact on the acquisition, use, and disposition of possessions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ridicule is the act of making fun of some aspect of another. It involves a combination of humor and degradation and encompasses a range of activities like teasing (Shapiro

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et al. 1991), sarcasm (Ducharme 1994), and ritualized insults (Abrahams 1962). Although this definition is intentionally broad, it is consistent with descriptions of ridicule as individual-directed disparagement humor (Janes and Olson 2000) and intentional provocation combined with playful off-record markers (e.g., exaggeration and metaphor; Keltner et al. 2001).

Children ridicule others who violate prescriptive or statistical norms (Shapiro et al. 1991). Although teasers primarily target individuals with noticeable shortcomings, they also construe positive deviance (i.e., too much of a good thing) as evidence of negative qualities (Shapiro et al. 1991). For instance, adolescents belittle nerds whose extreme intelligence is taken as a sign of social ineptitude (Danesi 1994). Those who are good at making people laugh at others gain status (Danesi 1994) and wield influence (Goodchilds 1959) among peers.

Scholars have identified many ways by which targets learn from ridicule. The process enables targets to develop the poise to handle embarrassing situations (Gross and Stone 1964). The content exposes them to community norms and values (Abrahams 1962). Buss (1980) identified classical and operant conditioning as processes involved in ridicule and the socialization of embarrassment. Toddlers learn to associate teasing and laughter with such taboos as public nudity and bed-wetting, and they learn to be embarrassed when they commit these taboos (classical conditioning). Parents tease their children in order to extinguish inappropriate behaviors (operant conditioning). Thus, children learn not only when to feel embarrassed but also how to avoid embarrassment. Buss focused on the socialization of embarrassment rather than on the effects of ridicule, *per se*, but his analysis treats embarrassment and socialization as consequences of ridicule.

The notion that ridicule leads to embarrassment and socialization emerged in findings from Shapiro et al.'s (1991) exploratory study of teasing among children. It also emerges in analyses of embarrassment and social behavior. For instance, Gross and Stone (1964) identified ridicule as a form of deliberate embarrassment and discussed socialization as an outcome of the process. Targets learn to withstand criticism, maintain poise, and adopt the perspective of referent others (Abrahams 1962). In his recent critique of nice-guy theories of social life, Billing (2001) argued that ridicule facilitates the socialization of embarrassment and the acquisition and maintenance of community norms. Embarrassment is an aversive stimulus that encourages circumspection about public images and discourages behaviors that threaten desired images (Leary 1995). The presence of others, a common feature of teasing among children (Shapiro et al. 1991), enhances the effects of ridicule on behavior. The presence of observers increases targets' motivations to seek and follow normative guidelines because it intensifies their feelings of embarrassment (Buss 1980). Reactions from observers enhance opportunities for targets to acquire normative guidelines, especially if the reactions support teasers' interpretations of social blunders (Billing 2001).

Observers not only participate in the process and reinforce the lessons that targets learn but also witness the proceedings and learn from them. It is unclear how the two roles are distributed across audience members. It is possible that most observers assume both roles. They can laugh and provide commentary while the teasing occurs and ponder the implications of teasing content later. Alternatively, it is possible that different observers perform different roles. Heterogeneity in awareness of group norms may result in knowledgeable observers chiming in and supporting interpretations of deviance while novices look on and learn to interpret social blunders. Identification with different parties in teasing episodes also results in different observers performing different roles. Those who identify with teasers may be more likely to chime in and share the amusement (Zillman and Cantor 1976), whereas those who identify with targets are likely to look on and share the embarrassment (Miller 1987). Nonetheless, some, if not all, observers learn vicariously from the degradation of others.

The model presented in figure 1 summarizes the roles of teasers, targets, and observers and their contributions to the process of ridicule. In the remainder of this article, I discuss findings from a qualitative study of the functions of ridicule among adolescents, its effects on consumer learning, and its impact on the acquisition, use, and disposition of possessions.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

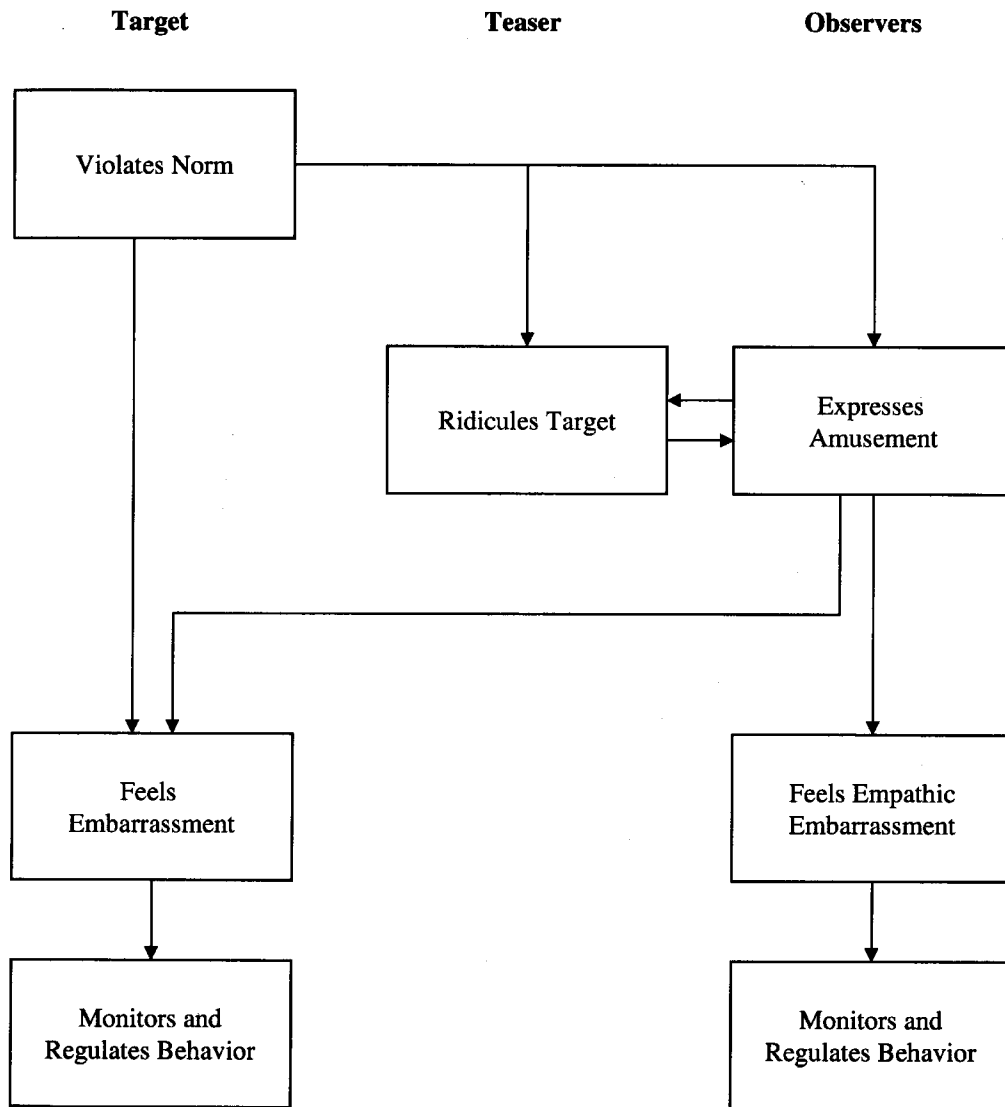
Sample Selection

I used purposive sampling to recruit informants for semi-structured interviews about their adolescent shopping experiences. Purposive sampling is based on the premise that informants from populations that manifest the phenomenon of interest are ideally suited to illuminate the phenomenon (Patton 1990). Accordingly, I recruited heavily from African American and male populations based on findings of the prevalence of teasing among these groups. The insult ritual known as "playing the dozens" has been studied extensively for its impact on young African Americans (Abrahams 1962) and its potential to illuminate aspects of African American culture (Garner 1983). Likewise, verbal dueling has been found to influence the social dynamics of adolescent males (Danesi 1994). African Americans and males represent 63% and 81% of the present sample, respectively.

I employed two undergraduate assistants from nearby cities to recruit student and nonstudent informants for audio-recorded interviews about their adolescent shopping behaviors. I used snowball sampling to supplement their efforts. After interviewing informants, I gave them contact information to share with friends who would be willing to talk about factors that influenced their brand choices and shopping behaviors throughout adolescence. Recruitment took place over a 29 mo. period and yielded 43 informants.

Informants were in the late adolescent to early adult developmental stage (ages 18–23). Although jokes about material objects are most prevalent during early adolescence

FIGURE 1
RIDICULE AS A SOCIALIZATION MECHANISM



(Eder 1991), I avoided children at this early developmental stage because I was reluctant to condone a hurtful activity among minors and I felt obligated, but unprepared, to counsel children with painful teasing experiences. Moreover, their efforts to conceal teasing from adults impede efforts to understand their teasing habits (Shapiro et al. 1991). In order to minimize these concerns, I recruited informants who were young enough to recall their adolescent teasing experiences but old enough to be uninhibited about discussing them with an adult interviewer.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following Rubin and Rubin's (1995) guidelines for conducting topical as opposed to cultural interviews, I devel-

oped an interview guide with a relatively fixed questioning structure. However, I omitted questions when responses became redundant and added questions when responses revealed the need to probe issues that I had not previously considered. The questioning structure reflected a funnel approach with general questions preceding specific ones. For instance, initial questions addressed the emergence of informants' interest in making their own shopping decisions and factors that sparked their efforts to do so. Later questions focused more specifically on sources of information about shopping alternatives, the role of feedback from peers, and the use of ridicule as feedback about consumption decisions. In order to obtain diverse perspectives of ridicule, I asked informants about their experiences as targets, observers, and

teasers. Interviews focused on clothing because of its use as an expressive medium and influence on social categorization (McCracken 1986), especially during adolescence (Danesi 1994).

Data collection and analysis were overlapping processes. I began coding transcripts shortly after conducting an initial set of interviews. Analysis of these interviews enabled the identification of unanswered questions to ask in subsequent interviews. I analyzed transcripts and interviewer notes using comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and many of the analytic operations outlined in Spiggle (1994), including comparison, categorization, abstraction, dimensionalization, and iteration. I made comparisons among specific instances in order to develop initial categories. I made comparisons among these categories to form abstract conceptual classes and uncover dimensions underlying their differences. These operations enabled me to develop a typology of ridicule that I refined using an iterative process of synthesizing initial findings, extant literature, and input from a team of undergraduate assistants.

FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes key findings from informants' accounts of ridicule experiences. These findings highlight the critical role of peer acceptance in teasers' interpretations of deviance and targets' reactions to ridicule. The following discussion amplifies points summarized in table 1 and provides examples to illustrate typological categories and dimensions.

Ostracism: Ridicule of Unacceptable Others

Informants shared stories of mean-spirited barbs used to put down and exclude those who did not fit in with the group. The following excerpt from an interview with Bill (white male, age 20) typifies the verbal abuse taken by kids who did not fit in with their peers:

Bill: Well, there was this one kid, Craig. We went to school with him from like first grade on and the whole time he didn't have any money. His parents were real poor and we knew that, everyone knew that he couldn't get anything. But he always had tight pants that were always too high. Always! And people consistently made fun of him throughout school where it got to the point that I felt bad for him. Because he came into school every day and was getting made fun of.

Interviewer: What would they say?

Bill: Craig had three pairs of pants. He had some white pants, they were too tight; he had some blue jeans, they were some high-waters, and he had some black pants that fit him okay but he wore them so much that they were filthy dirty and had holes in them. If he came in, he only had those three pairs of pants so we would make fun of him for having three pairs of pants. They would make fun of him like you're poor, you're sorry, you're so terrible. They really made him feel bad.

People cited Craig's limited wardrobe and the poor fit and finish of his trousers in their cruel jokes about his economic and social worth. His wardrobe contained two recognizable stigma symbols, tight pants and high-waters (pants that are too short). Stigma symbols are "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual" (Goffman 1963, 43-44). Craig's only decent pair of pants eventually became a stigma symbol when he wore them so often that they became worn out.

Primary Message. Targets are told why they are unacceptable. This type of interaction is cited in efforts to distinguish ridicule, where targets are excluded and not enjoined to participate in the laughter, from teasing, where friends joke about each other in a lighthearted manner (Eder

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF OBSERVED FUNCTIONS OF RIDICULE

	Ostracism	Hazing	Admonishment
Primary message	You don't belong, because . . .	You can belong, if . . .	Act like you belong!
Relational roles	Bully vs. victim. Teaser flexes individual and group muscle at the expense of lower status others.	Mentor vs. apprentice. Teaser assumes leadership role and teaches target how to gain membership.	Police vs. delinquent. Teaser polices group members and detains and embarrasses those who violate norms.
Status differential	Large, enduring gap between teasers and targets. Many factors may contribute to this gap.	Moderate, but decreasing knowledge gap within the group. Target is a novice who must learn the ropes.	Small, momentary commitment gap within the group. The target is caught out of uniform.
Emotional response	Emotions depend on acceptance goals and the locus of blame for not meeting them.	Targets are embarrassed by the negative attention.	Ambivalence. Targets appreciate the humor but are embarrassed by the norm violation.
Behavioral reaction	Both conformity and resistance were observed depending on targets' acceptance goals.	Conformity behaviors were often observed. The few who defied unpopular choices did not repeat them.	Targets conformed when possible but defended their choices or withstood criticism when necessary.

1991). Craig was unacceptable because he lacked the resources to abide by the dress code of the in crowd. The idea that people like Craig are unworthy of full participation in teasing rituals was reinforced with physical threats when he attempted to trade barbs with his tormentors. According to Bill, guys would be angered and embarrassed to be butts of Craig's jokes: "Oh, Craig is making fun of me? We make fun of Craig all day and he never says a word. Now, he's going to make fun of me?"

Relational Roles. Craig's experiences as an object of ridicule are consistent with the literature on bullying and victimization in which teasing is conceptualized as verbal aggression (Keltner et al. 2001). Like other forms of bullying, teasing can involve power differentials between parties and expressions of status dominance by aggressors (Shapiro et al. 1991). The bullies who tormented Craig gained their status and power by consuming material objects and belittling those without them. When Craig contested his role as victim, he was threatened with physical violence. Physical intimidation did not always accompany verbal aggression, but many targets exhibited behaviors that resembled responses to bullying. For instance, some retaliated verbally to "defend themselves" against those who "started it." Others fled to places where they were less likely to be bullied (e.g., other cliques or new schools).

Status Differential. The implied status differential between teasers and targets is large and enduring. However, the bases of these differences are numerous and varied. Craig was ridiculed for being poor. In his case, economic means was a salient dimension of status and his position in the hierarchy was relatively stable. Although poverty was a common attribution about those without coveted objects, it was not the only one. Informants spoke of strict parents refusing to buy provocative styles or pay inflated prices, thereby subjecting their children to taunts of immaturity or overprotection. According to Tamara (black female, age 18), independence becomes an important basis of status as children approach adolescence: "At that age I think it is just more about independence and like, oh, I can get away with this and my parents let me do this so it is just that certain degree of independence and when you are still under the control of your parents and they still treat you like a third grader, when you are a fifth grader that is just looked down upon."

In contrast to those ostracized for their inability to acquire coveted objects, some were shunned for their unwillingness to choose them. Those who showed irreverence for popular objects by rejecting them in favor of unpopular alternatives were looked upon as deviants and ridiculed accordingly. For instance, Kevin (black male, age 20) noted that guys were ridiculed for wearing tight pants, especially as the sagging style became popular. He acknowledged poverty as a common inference about those who have apparently outgrown their clothing, but he argued that something else is wrong with a guy who prefers to wear tight pants: "If he says I like them that way, then I'll say you are gay." Kevin and

others belittled guys with tight pants for displaying feminine qualities at an age when status gains were achieved by showing masculinity.

Emotional Responses. The range of emotions for targets of ostracism was broad in comparison to other categories of ridicule. Some were unconcerned about being accepted but tired of being bothered. They responded differently than did those who sought acceptance from their tormentors. For instance, Gary (white male, age 23) recalled his experiences as a high school student with long hair, baggy pants, an old car, and an aversion to objects associated with the in crowd. He laughed about being called names by the popular kids who passed by him in expensive cars: "I thought it was hilarious. . . . I could go to Abercrombie and Fitch tomorrow and I wouldn't have that problem anymore, but I didn't care too much about it." However, he expressed conflicting emotions about having less than his adversaries. On the one hand, he was envious of those who spent their parents' money at the mall when his parents were equally affluent but less generous. On the other hand, he was proud that he paid for his 1987 Oldsmobile with his own earnings. In verbal altercations with his adversaries, Gary characterized his car as a symbol of independence and their cars as handouts from their mommies and daddies.

Unlike Gary who took pride in his individuality and independence, some targets expressed frustration over trying but failing to be accepted by their peers. Some blamed strict parents for depriving them of popular goods and preventing them from achieving their acceptance goals. Some expressed despair over being stuck with stigmatized objects that they could not easily discard or replace.

Behavioral Reactions. The behavioral reactions to ostracism were as numerous and varied as the emotional responses. They included doing nothing about stigmatized objects, concealing them, increasing surveillance efforts, adopting popular objects, seeking safe havens, and defending unpopular choices. These behaviors were used alone or in various combinations. For instance, doing nothing about stigmatized objects, seeking refuge among similar others, and defending their choices were approaches used by people like Gary who claimed membership in countercultures. Gary took a lot of abuse for having long hair and avoiding popular fashions. In response, he sought others who shared his disdain for popular brands. His response is consistent with findings that adolescents join cliques for purposes of ego protection, status achievement, and identity formation (Danesi 1994). Ironically, despite claiming to value individuality, his clique eventually began to enforce a dress code of its own.

Concealing stigmatized objects, observing others, and adopting popular items were approaches common to many who chose to conform. For instance, Steve (white male, age 21) recalled how a former nerd transformed himself and even got dates with popular girls after he revised his wardrobe from the previous year. His new friends applauded him

for “finally seeing the light,” but his old friends chastised him for “selling out.”

Hazing: Ridicule of Acceptable but Unaccepted Others

Some informants shared examples in which ridicule was used to prepare individuals for group membership. As is the case with rites of passage and small group rituals (Rook 1985; Schouten 1991), this type of initiation rite often coincides with transition periods, has the potential to influence membership outcomes, involves a show of commitment to the group, and conveys and reinforces group norms.

Primary Message. Targets are told what they need to do (or stop doing) in order to be fully accepted by the group. For instance, Epitome (black male, age 18) indicated that his sister who “knew a lot about name brands” taught him how to gain acceptance among the in crowd: “If I had on Ninja Turtle shoes or something like that she would tease me or whatever. Just say things like your shoes are not name brand or mama got those from Payless or just certain things like that.” His sister may have had selfish motives for teasing him (e.g., sharpening her teasing skills or transforming him so she can avoid being teased about him), but he characterized her messages as lessons on style from a knowledgeable source. She used ridicule to teach him how arbiters of coolness perceive various brands, styles, and shopping outlets. He learned that discount apparel and juvenile fashions would impede his efforts to become part of the in crowd.

Relational Roles. The relationship of teaser to target is analogous to that of mentor and apprentice. Experienced members ridicule prospective members to discourage norm violations. As a result, continuing members uphold community standards and teach them to incoming members. Epitome described his sister as a knowledgeable mentor who prepared him for a group that frowned upon symbols of poverty or immaturity.

Status Differential. The status differential between teasers and targets is moderate in size, temporary in duration, and based on differences in knowledge. Unlike targets of ostracism, teasers perceive these targets as potential equals. Targets need only to learn social norms and demonstrate commitment to them. This need was particularly evident to those who entered new territory (e.g., a new place or status), as is the case with many rites of passage (Rook 1985). For instance, Michael (black male, age 18) drew attention as the new kid in town when he wore an outfit consisting of pants and a shirt by different manufacturers around peers who discouraged mixing and matching competing brands:

I came in there and I was perpin’, perpetrating, that is what they call it, perpin’, you know. I remember one day I had a Tommy Hilfiger shirt on and I had some Polo jeans on and they looked at me and they said, “Oh that’s not cool, Tommy Hilfiger shirt on, Polo jeans” and it was like well “you’re

perpin’ dude!” And I said, “What’s perpin’?” “Like perpetrating.” And I said, “What is perpetrating?” “You got two different brands on man, you can’t do that!” If you wear this brand you have to wear the other brand up here or vice versa.

Other informants told similar stories of someone being teased for combining popular brands in unacceptable ways, thereby revealing themselves as “wannabes” (i.e., impostors). Michael was caught wearing competing brands with prominent logos, accused of perpetrating a fraud, and instructed on the proper assembly of outfits consisting of popular brands. He closed a temporary status gap between him and his peers by overcoming a noticeable knowledge deficiency.

Emotional Responses. Targets of hazing did not react as negatively to the practice of teasing or the persons who teased them as did targets of ostracism. Many admitted feeling embarrassed, but they attributed the embarrassment to the unwanted attention and not to the cause of the attention. For instance, Max (black male, age 18) recalled life in middle school as a new kid with a prominent gap in his wardrobe:

In middle school the basketball jersey was the style. They were wearing them. I didn’t have one at the time. . . . You would start hearing the whispers behind your back. And then they would start talking about your shirt. Saying, “What kind of shirt is that?” Then they will say something like it is a Payless shirt or Kmart. . . . Looking, pointing, and laughing. . . . That means embarrassment for the person who is the victim of the jokes. If it was just one person talking about [you] and he was laughing it wouldn’t hurt as bad. But when there is a group laughing, I mean, you are in the middle of attention, but you aren’t getting the attention that you want.

Consistent with theorizing on the role of ridicule in the socialization of embarrassment (e.g., Buss 1980), Max attributed his embarrassment (unconditioned response) to the ridicule (unconditioned stimulus) and not to his choice of possessions (conditioned stimulus). Over time, he should be conditioned to view having or lacking certain possessions as grounds for embarrassment.

Behavioral Reactions. Many targets responded to ridicule by conforming to group norms. For instance, Bill immediately replaced his unpopular white sneakers with acceptable black ones after his peers laughed at his choice of colors.

I got a white pair of shoes back in middle school. Everybody had black tennis shoes. Nobody had any white tennis shoes. But I saw some that I liked and I went and got them. I wore them to school and everybody started making fun of me because I had some shiny white shoes on. So I took them back and got some black shoes. . . . They were just clowning me because I was standing out big time. It was shiny white.

. . . They weren't making fun of me like being mean, you know what I'm saying. They were just joking with me so much that I didn't want to be teased anymore. . . . I felt stupid. I liked the shoes. I like the shoes to this day, but everybody hated the shoes. I took them back.

The few who defended unpopular choices did not make similar choices on subsequent purchase occasions. For instance, Max bought a pair of Hakeem Olajuwon sneakers from Payless at a time when other kids wore Nike Air Jordans: "Everybody said you got those Hakeem Olajuwons and start making fun of that. . . . I just acted like those shoes were the best things out. That is all I could do. . . . I never bought a pair of those shoes again." Unlike Bill, Max did not conform immediately. Instead, he maintained his poise until he found an appropriate opportunity to correct his mistake. Despite defending his choice as the best available, he never frequented the store or purchased the brand again.

In order to facilitate their efforts to conform, many informants sought greater control over their clothing purchases. Their eagerness to relieve parents of shopping duties often followed instances in which they suffered the consequences of parents' choices. For example, Will (black male, age 18) came home and cried after kids made fun of the shirt he wore to school. He was a newcomer and a novice at wearing anything other than a uniform to school. When he asked his mother to buy him clothes like those that other kids wore, she bought inexpensive alternatives to popular brands. The shirt that brought him grief was produced by a manufacturer who mimicked the FUBU logo, but replaced the conjoined F and B with the letters P and B. Kids taunted him for being a "wannabe" and wearing a "PUBU" shirt. He dealt with the shirt by wearing it inside out to gym class. He dealt with his mother by giving halfhearted reactions to her clothing purchases until she surrendered the chore to him:

My mom used to try to shop like, "Oh, I bought this shirt for you today," and then I'd be like, "Thanks, Mom," but inside I'm like, "Oh why'd you buy that?" Then she'd start picking up on, like, "I'm done shopping for you. I'm just gonna give you money. Go and do your thing, cuz I'm not gonna bring stuff home and have you hurt my feelings." So . . . she doesn't shop for me.

Will's efforts to replace parental involvement with peer input are consistent with expectations of divergent trajectories for parental and peer influence over the course of adolescence (Ward 1974). His mother's response to his efforts is consistent with recent forecasts that a growing share of the \$14.1 billion spent on back-to-school shopping will be made by children shopping without parents (Horovitz 2003).

Admonishment: Ridicule of Accepted Others

Adolescents teased their friends to discourage norm violations. They used mild sarcasm for behaviors viewed as unbecoming of group members (Ducharme 1994) or sharp barbs like those exchanged in insult rituals (Dollard 1939) or verbal dueling matches (Danesi 1994). For instance, Dean (white male, age 19) and friends would say, "You got a job interview?" or "You got a date?" when someone wore khaki pants and a polo shirt. As he spoke, he looked at himself, laughed, and acknowledged that the outfit he once berated in high school is the one he now wears in college. The sarcasm is usually accompanied by laughter and unwanted attention for targets. It reinforces norms by calling attention to violations and highlighting acceptable excuses for them. For Dean and friends, sarcasm served as a reminder of prohibitions against dressing more professionally than expected for daily interactions among adolescents. According to Dean, only "dorks" chose to dress in business casual attire at that age.

Some people directed their sharpest barbs at their closest friends who understood their playful intentions and appreciated their clever insults. Magnus (white male, age 21) and his peers usually began with jokes about specific norm violations, but their teasing escalated to insults about those people who commit such violations: "[If you are] wearing plainer clothes, 'Oh he's scrubbing it today. He must be from the trailer parks,' that sort of thing. If you are wearing a button-up shirt or a real nice dress shirt or something with a tie, 'Oh, the nerd.'"

Primary Message. Targets are chastised for violating role expectations and urged to show commitment to group norms. Teasers accuse them of acting like members of an avoidance group or remind them of the rare occasions on which such behavior is permissible. In short, they confront targets who fail to act like they belong to the group. Their efforts are consistent with findings regarding the use of sarcasm and other forms of humor to uphold community standards (Ducharme 1994).

Relational Roles. Teasers perform a policing function. They monitor their surroundings for delinquent behaviors that can be interpreted as laughable deeds. They use ridicule to detain and embarrass delinquents and entertain others who reward clever barbs with laughter and approval (Goodchilds 1959). The rewards for teasers and costs to targets perpetuate a system in which delinquency is actively monitored and, when possible, norms are dutifully followed.

Status Differential. The status differential between teasers and targets is relatively small, momentary, and based on commitment to a common identity. The two parties would normally be viewed as equals if not for the slight advantage that teasers gain when they confront targets about norm violations that raise doubts about their commitment to group ideals. Such doubts are especially prevalent when someone acquires an object associated with a rival group. For instance, Gary and friends rejected khakis, polo shirts, spec-

tator sports, alcohol, and drugs as symbols of the in crowd. Instead, they favored objects like T-shirts, baggy pants, and skateboards that symbolized the skateboarding counterculture. They scoff at a retailer that purportedly targets skateboarders but also sells trendy items like polo shirts that are too delicate for skateboarding. When asked how he would feel if a friend embraces the popular brands and styles, Gary shared the following example:

Gary: One of my friends ended up dating a girl who wanted him to dress nicer and he didn't care because he was just crazy about her. So he ended up going shopping with her and he came back and, you know, he looked pretty much like a normal person, like the "in crowd" or what have you. And so we did give him shit about it.

Interviewer: What kinds of things did you say?

Gary: What did we say? Well, mostly just irrational things, I mean nothing . . . we really didn't have a valid argument against it. We would just ask "why are you dressing that way?" "You look like the average jock in our school" or something like that. Or "You going out to the bar later tonight?" Things like this, you know. And it's just, it was more like the way he dressed before we didn't have to say anything, he didn't really catch it or anything, but after he changed the way he dressed it was like, you know you really noticed it. And it was kind of like he stuck out a little bit more. But you know, all in all he was the same guy and we all knew that; and it was more like we were just playing with him. It was just a little, I want to say uncomfortable, but it was different.

Gary questioned his friend's commitment to their oppositional identity after his friend betrayed him and adopted popular brands to satisfy a girl from the in crowd. Gary sarcastically asked his friend if he would adopt the bad habits as well as the brands of their rivals. Gary admitted that his friend was still the same person on the inside, but he hated seeing him display symbols of a group that antagonized them throughout high school.

Emotional Responses. Some informants had mixed emotions as targets of teasing. They appreciated the humor and enjoyed being part of the fun (Eder 1991) but felt embarrassed by their mistakes and the attention they received for committing them. Others cited their enjoyment of teasing as justification for their willingness to be targets. They valued the joking relationships and were not offended when the joke was on them. Unlike targets of hazing, many were aware of their consumption missteps before they were teased about them. For instance, Keith (black male, age 19) accused his mom of punishing him by buying "fake Jordans" (sneakers) from Kmart and making him wear them to school. He knew his friends would tease him about the shoes, but he did not know how badly. He endured so many cracks about his "plastic shoes" that he wanted to avoid recess and gym class, two venues where his shoes would be noticed. Such

efforts to avoid the gaze of others are visible signs of embarrassment (Goffman 1956).

Behavioral Reactions. When possible, informants tried to comply with group norms, but parental restrictions, budgetary limits, and changing fashions complicated their efforts. Delaney (black male, age 18) alluded to the challenge of conforming to changing standards when he discussed back-to-school shopping as an opportunity to correct mistakes from the previous year: "If your pants were tight last year, I'll try and get baggier pants and hope that I don't grow into them too soon. Or if my shirt was young, I'd try and get a longer shirt. But there is something new just about every year. First it was tight pants and then it was maybe young shirts and then maybe tight shoes." Delaney explained that a "young" shirt is one that does not fall below the beltline. Because young shirts do not fit properly, they are taken as a sign that those who wear them cannot afford to replenish their wardrobes. Delaney was ridiculed for wearing "hand-me-ups" (hand-me-downs from younger siblings). The quote from Delaney suggests that when group norms are tied to fashion trends, efforts to comply with them are tantamount to aiming at a moving target.

When targets could not easily replace unpopular possessions, they endured the consequences of having them. Such was the case with Homer (white male, age 20), who drove an old peach-colored Volvo while his high school friends were driving newer SUVs in conservative colors: "Out of all my friends I had by far what they would deem as the worst car and the ugliest car possible. . . . They even gave it a nickname. They called it Peach Snapple." He admitted that the teasing affected him: "When I would drive at night, even though I had my own car, I would take one of my parents' cars because they had a nicer car and I preferred driving around in their car over my car. So I guess it definitely affected me even though my friends were just kidding around with me about it." As a high school student, Homer lacked the resources to replace the car that attracted unwanted attention. Consequently, he drove the car and endured the jokes until evenings and weekends when he had access to attractive alternatives.

DISCUSSION

In this research, I explore the functions of ridicule and its effects on consumer behavior among adolescents. I find that the practice of ridicule both reflects and affects adolescents' perceptions of belongingness, the content of ridicule conveys information about the consumption norms and values of peer groups, and the experience of ridicule influences the acquisition, use, and disposition of possessions. This article contributes to the consumer socialization literature by illuminating a powerful mechanism through which adolescents acquire consumption information from influential others. In addition, it contributes to knowledge of symbolic consumption by shedding light on efforts to make sense of objects and the types of people who possess them. The contributions to the consumer socialization and sym-

bolic consumption literatures are discussed briefly in the paragraphs that follow.

Social Environment and Consumer Socialization

This article highlights the potential for consumer culture theorists to enrich scholarship on consumer socialization. Arnould and Thompson (2005) propose "Consumer Culture Theory" (CCT) as a disciplinary brand for research on the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. CCT approaches can advance knowledge of consumer socialization by illuminating aspects of social life that influence the acquisition of consumption motives and values. Developmental approaches (Moore and Stephens 1975; Peracchio 1992, 1993) have contributed greatly to our understanding of the stages and processes involved as children acquire knowledge and skills to function as consumers in the marketplace. However, socialization also occurs at advanced stages of development (Hewitt 1997) and involves acquiring more than just skills and knowledge (John 1999). By probing the experience of ridicule among adolescents, the present research illuminated a powerful source of information about consumption norms and a major determinant of consumption values for an increasingly sophisticated, yet highly malleable, group of consumers.

Recent efforts to understand how aggressive marketers (Schor 2004), materialistic parents (Goldberg et al. 2003), and influential peers (Achenreiner 1997) affect children's consumption patterns have advanced knowledge of the social forces and experiences that contribute to consumer socialization. The present study contributes to these efforts by exploring a powerful mechanism through which influential socialization agents provide feedback about consumption missteps. Although teaching is seldom the motive of teasers, learning is often a by-product of teasing. Targets and observers of ostracism learn which social categories are perceived as avoidance groups and which objects are associated with these groups. Targets of hazing learn the norms and values of aspirational groups. They also learn what constitutes embarrassing behaviors to members of these groups (Buss 1980; Gross and Stone 1964). Targets of admonishment receive embarrassing reminders of the social costs of nonconformity. Across types of ridicule, informants cited feelings of inadequacy and concerns about belonging as reasons why they now comply with the norms they once violated.

Ridicule and Consumption Symbolism

This research contributes to knowledge of symbolic consumption (Belk 1988; Solomon 1983) by exploring a mechanism through which adolescents construct, negotiate, and disseminate interpretations of objects and the people who possess them. I find that adolescents apply cultural categories and principles to make sense and make fun of consumption practices that violate salient norms. For instance, they joke about the constraints imposed on peers whose conservative attire suggests extreme parental influence over

their choices, and they belittle these sheltered peers as babies or *momma's boys*. Cultural categories (e.g., *momma's boy*) are a result of efforts to segment the world into discrete parcels, whereas cultural principles (e.g., conservative and dependent) are the organizing ideas by which the segmentation is performed (McCracken 1986). Teasers selectively consider other inputs like personal characteristics, past behavior, social attachments, and other possessions when choosing which function of ridicule to use and which cultural categories and principles to apply. They negotiate interpretations of targets with observers whose laughter and commentary reflect the extent to which they share teasers' interpretations. If teasers and observers have similar interpretations of targets and their possessions, then teasers have license to make exaggerated claims about targets and the cultural categories ascribed to them. For instance, if the teaser and observers agree that the guy who wears tight pants is too poor to replenish his wardrobe, then the teaser is free to crack jokes about real or imagined elements of the consumption constellations of poor people, even if these stereotypes do not apply to the target. A consumption constellation is a "cluster of complementary products, specific brands, and/or consumption activities used to construct, signify, and/or perform a social role" (Englis and Solomon 1996, 185). Through ridicule, adolescents produce and exchange ideas about the consumption constellations of avoidance groups.

With few exceptions, most notably those with older siblings, informants identified middle school as the period that marked the onset and peak of ridicule about possessions, the start of their fashion awareness and brand consciousness, and the beginning of their interest in shopping. Their accounts are consistent with extant findings that middle school is the time by which most children have developed an understanding of consumption symbolism (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1992). My findings suggest that children not only understand the identity implications of objects by this time, but they also apply and refine this understanding in their efforts to construct their identities and label others. The onset of adolescence is a time when the self-concept is especially fragile (Rosenberg 1986) and heavily influenced by the reflected appraisals of others (Harter 1986). When adolescents ridicule peers about possessions, and by extension themselves (Belk 1988), they threaten their fragile self-concepts and perpetuate a pattern of seeking material solutions for identity problems (Holt and Thompson 2004).

Concerns about name brands and jokes about poverty were especially prevalent among informants from working-class neighborhoods. This observation is consistent with symbolic self-completion theory, which predicts increased self-symbolizing behavior among individuals who face barriers to achieving self-defining goals (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). The notion that expensive goods are pursued most aggressively by consumers who are not necessarily among the most able to afford them has important implications for public policy. One implication involves a need for consumer education or protection programs to address

problems created by their need to self-symbolize. For instance, these consumers may be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of idealized advertising images (Richins 1991), effects that are heightened by their media consumption habits (Schor 2004). Another implication of the observed self-symbolizing tendencies involves the use of school uniform policies. A policy of mandatory school uniforms may reduce the psychological and social pressures for children to wear expensive brands and the financial burdens on parents who buy them. If uniforms are only optional, they might eventually become stigma symbols, especially if the option to buy them is exercised only by strict parents and low-income families. Of course, other factors should be considered when designing and implementing school uniform policies (Crockett and Wallendorf 1998).

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