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**Citation for published version:**

Marchant, C & O'Donohoe, S 2014, 'Edging out of the nest: Emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships' *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 30, no. 15-16, pp. 1554-1576. DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2014.935798

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/0267257X.2014.935798](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2014.935798)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

*Journal of Marketing Management*

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Marchant, C., & O'Donohoe, S. (2014). Edging out of the nest: emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(15-16), 1554-1576. 10.1080/0267257X.2014.935798

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This is the authors' accepted manuscript for the article:

Marchant, C., & O'Donohoe, S. (2014). Edging out of the nest: emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(15-16), 1554. 10.1080/0267257X.2014.935798

## **Edging out of the nest: emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships**

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## **Edging out of the nest: emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships**

### **Abstract**

The transition to adulthood, often accompanied by an emptying of the family nest, has implications for family relationships, identities, and consumption practices. Despite this, the voices and experiences of emerging adults are largely missing from literature on family consumption. Emerging adult families typically combine digital natives and digital immigrants, but little is known about how their interactions around digital communications technology relate to emerging adult preoccupations with affiliation and autonomy. This interpretive study explores how emerging adults' smartphones are bound up with a complex network of family communication and consumption practices, often across household, geographic and generational boundaries. Affiliation and autonomy emerged as intertwined rather than competing dimensions of participants' smartphone use, contributing to the distribution and development of family as the nest empties.

**Key words:** emerging adults, family relationships, smartphones, consumption; lifecourse transitions, affinity/autonomy.

### **Statement of Contribution**

This study contributes to an understanding of family consumption by giving voice to emerging adult consumers whose role as family members has been neglected in the marketing and consumer research literature. It offers insight into family communications and

consumption practices during the extended transition towards the empty nest, focusing on how emerging adults used their smartphones to maintain and transform relationships with immediate and extended family members.

## **Edging out of the nest: emerging adults' use of smartphones in maintaining and transforming family relationships**

### **Introduction**

A lifecourse approach to human development addresses the relationships between individuals' trajectories, the other lives to which they are connected, and the particular historical period in which they unfold (Hutchison, 2011). Theories of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004) draw on this perspective, emphasising how recent trends in education, employment, marriage and parenthood have created a lengthy liminal period between adolescence and adulthood. This period, often lasting from the late teens until the end of the twenties, is characterised as an age of identity exploration, self-focus, instability, and possibilities.

In emphasising 'linked lives' (Elder, 1994), a lifecourse perspective highlights that the transition to adulthood, and the associated challenges of balancing autonomy and affiliation, are played out across the full range of family relationships. Every family involves multiple relationship groupings, and a continual interplay between individual and collective 'identity bundles' (Epp & Price 2008, p.58). As these are challenged by transitions, emerging adulthood has implications for both communications and consumption practices within the family.

Studies of family consumption in marketing and consumer research literature rarely include emerging adults or explore their consumption experiences during this important lifecourse transition. Limited research exists on consumption in empty nest families (Curasi, Maclaran & Hogg, 2014), and family nests actually in the process of emptying have received even less attention. The role of personal technology - particularly the increasingly ubiquitous

smartphone - in family life is also poorly understood. Coyne et al. (2013) argue that digital media use among emerging adults and their parents merits particular research attention because at this point in time, emergent adult families combine digital natives and digital immigrants (Margaryan, Littlejohn & Vojt, 2011).

This study contributes to understanding of family consumption in three key ways. First, it gives voice to emerging adult consumers in their role as family members, interacting with parents, siblings, grandparents and extended family. Second, building on prior research exploring consumption *after* the family nest has emptied, it offers insights into consumption as the nest gradually empties. Third, by focusing on emerging adults' family interactions around smartphones, we offer insights into how this particular technology 'can play an important role in re-creating altered rituals and everyday interactions' (Epp & Price 2008, p.59).

This paper begins by highlighting the lack of attention given to emerging adults as family members within marketing and consumer research literature. It then reviews broader social science research examining the characteristics of emerging adulthood, their implications for family relationships and the role of mobile technology in emerging adults' family interactions. Following an overview of our qualitative study, key findings are presented, highlighting how smartphones were drawn into the delicate dance between autonomy and affiliation (Kleine, Schultz-Kleine & Kernan, 1995) performed by our participants and their families during this lifecourse transition. Finally, the implications of these findings are considered for our understanding of family consumption and smartphone marketing practices targeting emerging adults and their families.

## **Emerging adults – a missing voice in consumer research on the family**

Although studies in leading marketing and consumer research journals offer many insights into family consumption, there is a striking lack of focus on older teenagers and young adults as family members. This is the case even in studies relying on young adults or undergraduate students as participants (Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Bravo et al., 2007) or involved in recruiting or interviewing members of their own families (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Foxman, Tansuhaj & Ekstrom, 1989; Curasi, Price & Arnould, 2004). Recent ethnographies either focus on families with pre-teen children (Epp & Price, 2009) or exclude the experiences of older teenage family members from the analysis (Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013; Coupland, 2005). Three 19-21 year-olds were included in the six-family study by Kerrane and his colleagues, but discussed only as examples of renegeing on parental bargains (Kerrane, Bettany & Hogg, 2012) or parent-child micro-environments (Kerrane & Hogg, 2012). Other family-related studies, such as Bradford and Williams (2009), included some young adults as participants, but did not consider consumer experiences particular to this lifestage. Indeed, our review of existing consumer research identified only two key studies focusing on family relationships as children reach adulthood, one from the mother's perspective and the other from that of the daughter.

Hogg and her colleagues (Hogg, Curasi & Maclaran, 2004; Curasi, Maclaran & Hogg, 2014) explored women's transition to new roles and identities when their children left home, and their efforts to 'do' motherhood when 'home' and 'family' were no longer synonymous. This study highlights the shift in mothers' caring from *doing* things for their children towards *giving* them things such as care packages or items for their new home. As well as expressing some relief at the reduction in domestic drudgery, many empty nest mothers expressed a sense of loss or grief at their children leaving home, or even at the prospect of this happening (Curasi et al.,

2014). At the same time, empty nest mothers felt their success as parents depended on their children's ability to thrive as independent adults.

The second study examined intergenerational influences on grocery choices from the perspective of young women who, having left home to go to college, found themselves on the verge of independence from parents (Moore, Wilkie & Adler, 2001, p. 288; Moore, Wilkie & Lutz, 2002). The authors suggest that intergenerational influence on these young consumers' grocery choices was based on 'millions of episodes' and 'the repetitive rhythms and rituals' of everyday life in the family home (Moore et al., 2001, p.291). As children assume adult status and move out, Moore et al. (2001, 2002) suggest that intergenerational influence may wax, wane, cease and even reverse, depending on the relevance of particular product categories to children's lifestyle and their interactions with flatmates, friends, colleagues and romantic partners.

Young adults' views on their place in the family are touched upon in Hirschman's (1994) study of consumers and their animal companions: some of her younger participants (aged 18-25) treated family pets as siblings who had in some cases acquired 'favoured child' status once the young adult had left home. For example, one participant complained that when she tries to bring leftovers from a family meal back to college, 'I have to fight [for it]. My parents say "Poor Prince, what's Prince going to eat?"' (Hirschman, 1994, p.621).

Overall then, it seems that children's progression towards adulthood is accompanied by various tensions and shifts in family roles and dynamics, some of which may be expressed through consumption practices. The limited consumer research in this area offers glimpses of how identities and relationships are reconfigured once the family nest has emptied. Given Commuri and Gentry's (2000) call for research exploring transitions between stages of the family life cycle, questions arise about the family dynamics and consumption practices accompanying the

*emptying* nest. Furthermore, little is known about the experiences or perspectives of older children, either on leaving the family nest or preparing to fly. The next section draws upon social science literature in order to explore the implications of this phase for young people's family relationships and consumption practices.

### **Emerging adulthood and the lifecourse**

According to Elder (1994, p.5), a lifecourse approach to human development is based on the central premise of 'linked lives' - the embeddedness of human lives in social relationships across the lifespan, within an ever-changing society. The theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2004) fits Elder's lifecourse paradigm, since it suggests that, particularly for privileged groups in the industrialised world, there has been a shift towards longer periods in education, and deferred marriage and parenthood (Willoughby & Arnett, 2013). Many young people, from their late teens until the end of their twenties, feel they are no longer adolescents but not yet fully-fledged adults. This in-between period is one of identity exploration, self-focus, instability and possibilities (Arnett, 2004; Brynner, 2005; Gitelson & McDermott, 2007).

The individual transformations of emerging adulthood occur within networks of family relationships (Aquilino, 2008). Indeed, emerging adults identify the cornerstones of adulthood as accepting responsibility for oneself; making independent decisions; and becoming financially independent. On each of these dimensions, the journey towards autonomy implies a changing relationship with parents (Arnett, 2004). This relationship may be influenced by living arrangements (Kloep & Hendry, 2010). Comfort, convenience or economic constraints linked to job and housing markets may keep emerging adults longer in the 'feathered nest/gilded cage' of the family home (Avery, Goldscheider, & Speare, 1992), with implications for emotional boundaries, privacy, and parental intrusiveness (Aquilino, 2008). This is an issue affecting an increasing number of families; in the UK, the Office for National Statistics



reported that 3.3 million 20-34 year-olds lived with their parents in 2013, the highest level since records began in 1996 (Osborne, 2014).

Although the desire for greater autonomy in emerging adult lives is well documented (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Arnett & Tanner, 2008), autonomy is a complex, multidimensional construct (Beyers et al., 2003; Lamborn and Groh, 2009; Kagitcibasi, 2013). In addition to agency or control over one's actions, it involves a process of separation-individuation, 'the establishment of a sense of self, separate from other primary love objects and the acquisition of one's unique individuality' (Kins et al., 2012, p. 1). A sense of ongoing connectedness with family has also been found to be an important element of autonomy for older adolescents and young adults (Beyers et al., 2003), as this can give them the confidence to make their own way in the world. Thus, the warmth, support and respect parents show their children is crucial in the separation-individuation process (Seiffge-Krenke, 2012).

Over time, emergent adults generally come to see their parents as 'neither the demigods they adored as children nor the clueless goofs they scorned as adolescents, but simply people who, like themselves, have a mix of qualities, merits as well as faults' (Arnett, 2004, p.56). Such insight creates the conditions for greater parent-child reciprocity, but this requires both filial and parental maturity: children must be able to provide support to parents, and parents must be able to seek and accept it (Nydegger, 1991). Parents do not always feel ready to accept their children's adult status, and without this 'blessing' childhood cannot come to a natural end (Aquilino, 2008).

In contrast to the many studies examining emerging adults' parental relationships, relatively little is known about their interactions with siblings, grandparents or other family members (Aquilino, 2008). Anecdotal evidence of changing sibling dynamics is provided by Hancock (2013), who notes that once her eldest child flew the nest, her middle child spent less time at

home, leaving the youngest feeling even more lonely. More positively, she suggests that the emptying nest gives younger children opportunities to try new roles, and even become closer to siblings and parents. Willoughby and Arnett (2004, p.298) see the lack of research on emergent adult sibling relationships as 'a particularly striking gap' since relationships with siblings can be one of the most intense and long-lasting in many people's lives (Shortt & Gottman, 1997). Negotiating more egalitarian relationships is a key developmental challenge at this point, not least for older siblings who have enjoyed age-related power and status since childhood.

### **Emerging adult families and communication technology**

Given lifecourse researchers' focus on developing lives interacting with particular historical periods (Elder, 1994), one important characteristic of emerging adults at this time is that, unlike their parents they are 'digital natives', brought up with technology seamlessly woven into the tapestry of their lives (Margaryan et al., 2011). Families combining digital natives and digital immigrants are interesting sites for exploring consumption practices around communication technology, yet there is little research into the dynamic interplay between emerging adults and parents in relation to media use (Coyne et al., 2013).

Studies tend to paint a pessimistic picture of the ever-growing influence of technology on family life (Cawley & Hynes, 2010). For instance, Turkle (2011) worries that digital technology leads families to live their lives in parallel, 'alone together'. Concern has also been expressed that adolescents' frequent electronic communication with peers could be at the expense of family relationships (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield 2008). Others have suggested that technology can lead to 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2001) or 'helicopter parents' constantly monitoring their children and inhibiting their independence (Schofield- Clark 2013). On the other hand, digital technology may help extended family members maintain contact

across geographic and generational boundaries (Epp & Price, 2008; Tsai, 2011; Wilding, 2006), not least in empty nest families (Mesch, 2006).

Jennings and Wartella (2013) call for studies exploring how particular digital technologies such as smartphones affect family relationships. Just over half the British adult population now owns a smartphone; internet-enabled phones accounted for 74% of all UK mobile sales in the first quarter of 2013 (Ofcom, 2013). They are no longer the preserve of the younger generation: over half of British 35-55 year olds and a quarter of the 55+ age-group own smartphones (Intel, 2012). Given their ubiquity, multi-functionality, and connective power (Ofcom 2013), smartphones offer an interesting but largely neglected lens for exploring emerging adults' often complex and under-researched family relationships. Ribak's (2009) ethnography exploring the role of mobile phones (rather than smartphones) in Israeli 15-18 year-olds' parental relationships offers some insights into how mobiles might be bound up with the independence-dependence dialectic of emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2008). Whilst parents using phones to control offspring was irritating, it was observed that having a mobile phone facilitated more independence, since parents could always be contacted if difficulties arose (Ribak, 2009). Ultimately, this study suggests that mobiles served as transitional objects for these teenagers, rendering parents 'absent-thought-ever-present'. Similarly, other researchers have argued that mobile phones can serve as electronic umbilical cords connecting teenagers to their families (Wilding, 2006), offering reassurance to parents and independence to children (Devitt & Roker, 2009; Ling, 2004), and helping young people balance family influence and peer involvement (Axelsson, 2010, Ling, 2010).

In some respects smartphones allow emerging adults to distance themselves further from their families, providing constant access to intimate and internet 'friends' alike. On the other hand, electronic devices can encourage communal family time, since teenagers can use them whilst watching TV with other family members (Ofcom 2013). Little is known, however, about the

role of smartphones in the lives of families edging towards the empty nest, or how emerging adults' smartphone consumption practices may reflect or even refashion family relationships during this lifecourse transition.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative, interpretive study began as an exploration of female emerging adults' uses and gratifications in relation to iPhones, with particular focus on iPhone apps (mobile applications). At the time, the iPhone was the preferred handset for this age group (Barnett, 2010) and offered the greatest choice of apps (Intel, 2012). Young women were the focus of the study as they make greater use of their phones and become increasingly dependent on them as they progress through their teens (Haste, 2005, O'Doherty et al., 2007). Twenty participants from central Scotland were recruited through snowball sampling by using the first author's personal network to find older teenage iPhone users within a year, either side, of the transition from school to college, university or work (Table 1). This led to a sample that was predominantly middle-class and suburban, which may also be reflective of the premium price of iPhones. There was also limited diversity in other respects: all participants were white and had heterosexual parents, most of whom were married. The families involved had between one and three children, though not all still lived at home. None shared their home with extended family members. Due to the Scottish education system, some of the participants in the final year at school were aged 16 or 17, placing them on the verge of the age range associated with emerging adulthood, although the choices and transitions they faced gave them the same 'in-between' experiences as older participants.

**Table One: Details of research participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age and circumstances</b>	<b>Phase and data source</b>	<b>Family home</b>
Sara	19, finishing gap year, starting university shortly, part time job, living at home	Phase 1 - Group 1	Married parents, one younger sister
Lorna	19, first year at University, part-time job, living away	Phase 1 – Group 1	Divorced mother and live-in boyfriend, no siblings
Ingrid	19, first year of University, part-time job, living away	Phase 1– Group 1	Divorced mother, no siblings
Helen	18, just finished school, awaiting results for university, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – Group 2	Married parents, one younger brother
Lucy	18, first year of Beauty School, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – Group 2	Divorced mother, no siblings
Chloe	18, just finished school, awaiting results for University, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – Group 3	Married parents, two younger brothers
Emma	18, just finished school, awaiting results for university, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – Group 3	Married parents, one younger sister
Louise	18, just finished school, awaiting results for university, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – Group 3	Married parents, one younger sister
Jen	18, just finished school, awaiting results for university, not working, living at home	Phase 1 – diary only	Married parents, one older and one younger sister
Cat	18, just finished school, awaiting results for university, not working, living at home	Phase 1 - diary only	Married parents, one younger brother
Kirsty	18, just started University, not working, living away	Phase 2 – Group 4	Married parents, one younger brother
Millie	18, just started University, not working, living away	Phase 2 – Group 4	Married parents, one younger brother
Kathy	18, just started University, not working, living away	Phase 2 – Group 4	Married parents, one older sister
Molly	17, final year of school, weekend job, hopes to study abroad/take gap year, lives at home	Phase 2 – Group 5	Married parents, one older brother
Katie	17, final year of school, not working, intends to go to university next year, living at home	Phase 2 – individual phone interview	Married parents, one younger brother
Layla	17, final year at school, not working, intends to go to university next year, living at home	Phase 2 - Group 5	Married parents, one younger brother
Rosie	17, final year at school, weekend job, intends to go to university, living at home	Phase 2 – Group 5	Married parents, one younger brother and one younger sister
Lauren	17, final year of school, weekend job, intends to study art, living at home	Phase 2 – Group 6	Married parents, one younger brother
Amanda	16, final year of school, weekend job, intends to go to university, living at home	Phase 2 – Group 6	Married parents, one younger brother
Morven	16, final year of school, not working, intends to go to university or take a year off, living at home	Phase 2 – Group 6	Married parents, one older sister

We had expected peers and social networking sites to feature prominently in participants' accounts, and while these were certainly mentioned, we were struck by the extensive family communications reported. This led to a second phase of research, and ultimately to an analysis of how iPhone consumption practices were bound up with the reconfiguration (or evolution) of relationships of early emerging adults with their parents, siblings and extended family members. The focus on young women remained to ensure continuity across the two phases and to further explore insights into the emptying nest.

Retrospective accounts in interview situations rely on memory and may lead routine practices to be overlooked or forgotten (Butcher & Eldridge, 1990; Martens, 2012). Therefore, both research phases involved a sequential, multi-method research design. Participants kept individual daily diaries ('app diaries' in phase one, broadening to 'phone diaries' in phase two) for a week. Diaries can provide reliable time allocation data as well as personal details, yet are not common in marketing research (Gotze et al., 2007). Although three-month research diaries have been used successfully (Spowart & Nairn, 2013), concerns about fatigue due to heavy iPhone usage led to the selection of a more conventional seven-day completion period (Butcher & Eldridge, 1990). To reduce confusion and frustration, instructions were kept flexible and simple (Butcher & Eldridge, 1990, Zimmerman & Lawrence-Weider, 1977), and since the diaries were emailed daily, guidance and encouragement could be provided if required. The iPhones itself was the medium for completing and emailing diaries which seemed appropriate, both in light of this study's iPhone focus and because young adults tend to prefer electronic diary reporting (Lim et al., 2010).

The diaries served to 'auto-drive' (Heisley & Levy, 1991) discussion in the focus groups, prompting participants to elaborate and reflect on the activities they had documented. Given

their age and the subject matter, friendship groups of between two and four people were expected to be more engaging than individual interviews and encourage greater ‘social enactment’ and debate (Halkier, 2010). Venues were suggested by the groups themselves, including family homes, a TV room in halls of residence and a meeting room in a school sports centre. Discussions lasted between 40-60 minutes. Two participants did not attend a focus group but provided diaries, and another was ultimately unable to attend but took part in an individual telephone interview instead.

All the focus groups were transcribed verbatim, and analysed along with the diaries using the part-to-whole approach advocated by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1994). Each line of the individual transcripts and diaries was read, emergent themes were noted, and theoretical notes made for each participant. A process of constant comparison between transcripts and diaries was undertaken independently by the authors, with themes identified by a process of de-contextualizing and re-contextualising chunks of data within and across transcripts and diaries (Spiggle, 1994). At that point, the authors jointly explored emergent themes, seeking out negative instances and moving between data and relevant literature to refine the analysis.

## **Findings**

Many participants observed that the diary task surprised them as they had not realised just how much they used their smartphones; indeed, several entries included comments such as ‘*On SMS to check my texts – pretty much all day ha ha!*’ and ‘*you don’t really notice you are using it, it just helps you out with everyday things*’. While the frequency of use surprised the participants, what surprised us was how much of their use involved contact with family members; after all, emerging adults’ improved parental relationships has been attributed to reduced interaction, especially if they have moved out (Arnett, 2004; Collins & van Dulmen, 2013).

Participants still living at home reported a considerable amount of iPhone communication related to parental caring practices, including queries about their meal preferences, requests for additions to family shopping lists, and arrangements for driving them to or from sport or social activities. Those living away from home generally had more to say about using their iPhones to maintain the flow of family communications. Nonetheless, consistent with the movement around Dodd's (2011) 'empty' nest, there was a strong sense of *all* participants flying in and out of the family nest, and renegotiating relationships across different family micro-environments (Kerrane & Hogg 2012). Overall, participants' iPhone consumption practices seemed to be implicated in – and indicative of – what were often quite subtle changes in their everyday interactions with parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members.

In keeping with this, affiliation and autonomy did not emerge in this study as polarised positions creating tensions or '*social dramas*' (Epp & Price 2008), nor did this appear to be the start and end points of a linear sequential process associated with edging out of the nest. Instead, degrees of affinity and autonomy were evident in participant accounts, and in some cases they shaded into each other. The following sections, then, explore how participants described their experiences in terms of affinity *and* autonomy as well as affinity *or* autonomy.

### **Autonomy**

Participants in this study did not present themselves as uniformly or constantly straining towards greater control over their lives or in their dealings with family, and they talked about what connected them to family members as well as what set them apart. Nonetheless, as discussed below, their accounts reflected a process of what Tanner (2013, p. 27) terms 'recentering...a shift in power, agency, responsibility and dependence between emerging adults and their social contexts'.

### ***Separation-individuation***



Processes of individuation were most commonly articulated in relation to parents, especially in terms of the digital native/immigrant divide (Coyne et al., 2013). Thus, Millie remarked that her father “can’t figure out Facebook”, while Morven and Amanda made fun of their fathers’ texting practices:

*Morven: Like my dad has a template text he sends out, like ‘please give me a ring – thanks’ (laughs) – he puts “Dad” on the end and doesn’t seem to know that I know it’s from him*

*Amanda: My dad does that too!  
(Morven and Amanda, 16, home)*

Different generational habits and preferences with respect to mobiles/smartphones also fed into a sense of separation; Millie observed ‘*I just think it’s easier to text, my Dad’s like, it’s so much easier to call*’, while Rosie’s mother constantly complained about her being ‘*on that thing again*’. Parents also seemed uncomfortable with participants constantly using their phones to change arrangements:

*My parents always complain now all of us change plans so quickly because we used to make arrangements and just stick to them... (Morven, 16, home)*

Epp and Price (2008) suggest that new technologies require families to generate norms around their use, with violations of these family norms creating social dramas. While these accounts may be interpreted as minor social dramas, they also seem to play a role in creating distinct identities for participants, especially in relation to their parents.

A sense of self as distinct from (and more mature or discerning than) siblings was also evident in some accounts. For example, Chloe’s brother ‘*went mental and bought loads [of apps] but I personally haven’t done that*’, while Helen’s brother was apparently swayed by the most popular apps, ‘*but I don’t do that, I only get apps I know I will use*’. Rosie’s story about using her iPhone to keep in touch with home whilst on holiday abroad serves to distance her sense of self from both her brother and her parents:

*...my mum went to FaceTime me and she's like "oh my goodness, I can see your face" and I'm like "Hi Mum!" and the whole family got in on it and my brother's like "look at my parents, what are they even like, they are so embarrassing" but for them it was really helpful to see me (Rosie, 17, home)*

Rosie takes pleasure in repeating her brother's disparaging comments about their parents' digital naivety. At the same time, she presents herself as more mature than her sibling, rising above the mockery by appreciating how much it meant for her parents to see their absent daughter rather than just hearing her voice.

Considered individually, the comparisons made by Rosie and other participants may be seen as constructing minor, perhaps even negligible points of distinction. Taken collectively, however, they appear to be bound up with subtle but not insignificant processes of individuation.

### ***Contested and accepted control***

As children approach adulthood and seek greater control over their lives, parents can find it quite a challenge to 'stand back and not interfere' (Hogg et al., 2004: p. 248; Aquilino, 2008). Consistent with this, contested control was evident in some participants' accounts of tensions in their iPhone-related interactions with parents. This was not presented in terms of outright confrontation; rather, it tended to involve a degree of frustration, evasion or subterfuge in dealing with parents.

Many participants complained about 'control conversations' (Ribak, 2009) whereby parents attempted to micro-manage them, converting their treasured iPhones into surveillance tools (Schofield-Clark, 2013). For example, Lauren mentioned that her parents texted her in the morning to get her up, commenting that she either did not open their texts or replied that she was already up, even if she was actually still in bed. Asked if there was anything on her phone

that she wouldn't want others to see, Lucy replied that she was happy for her friends to see iPhone content, *'but people I don't know... or like my Mum, no thank you'*, and Maggie acknowledges *'my dad has Facebook but I don't have him on it, I think he kinda understands I don't want him on it (all laugh)'*.

A sense of parental pester power and a degree of participant exasperation emerged from accounts of parents texting too often, expecting a response and becoming anxious if none was forthcoming:

*Mum and Dad were away so Mum would text in the morning to check that we were up, so if they didn't get a reply to the text, she'd keep going until one of us answers and like, "we're up, we're going to get to school, it's fine, it's fine". (Amanda 16, home)*

*It's my worst fear to lose my phone, not just because it's my phone...but just to be able to tell my mum where I am. If she can't contact me, she'll phone the police! (Lucy 18, home)*

While these examples came from participants still living at home and embedded in daily routines, there was also evidence of parental attempts to micro-manage from a distance. For example, although Kirsty had left for university, *'Mum calls it [her phone] all the time, like she called this morning and it's "Where were you last night?"'*

Contested control also occurred due to conflicting inter-generational views on appropriate iPhone use, perhaps reflecting different perspectives of digital natives and immigrants within the family (Coyne et al., 2013). As discussed above, parents sometimes bemoaned their offspring's attachment to their phones and had different views regarding etiquette. Participants appeared to make little or no adjustment to their behaviour, however: Lucy was constantly in trouble with her mother for exceeding the minutes or data in her contract, while Sara tended to be *'quite sly if out with Mum and her friends about checking my phone'*.

Although emerging adulthood challenges parents to acknowledge and encourage their children's independence, participants also talked about occasions where they were accepting of parental surveillance. For example, Amanda did not resent her parents' desire for her to remain contactable:

*My parents just feel more reassured knowing I have my phone so I can contact them, like I'm not sure they'd let me go into Edinburgh without a phone, they'd need to know that if something happened I could get hold of someone but like if I am away abroad, I will always try and get a call card and try and call home when I can...we're quite close. (Amanda, 16, home)*

Here it is clear that Amanda, on the edge of the emerging adult age range and living at home, still remains subject to parental control and surveillance; her parents might not even 'let' her travel into the city centre without a phone. Beyond that, however, she demonstrates a degree of filial maturity (Nydegger, 1991): understanding and accepting her parents' concerns about her safety, she is happy to communicate and reassure them. All participants in this study relied heavily on their parents for financial support. This extended to paying for their phone contracts, placing participants in 'the golden cage of parental generosity' (Ribak, 2009, p.185). Although they appreciated that they probably couldn't afford an iPhone themselves, several participants were conscious of being answerable to their parents as a result. Sara's father did not allow her to download an online banking app which would have been connected to her parents' account. A sense of foreboding over lost phones was evident; Lorna (19, away) for example has '*a mini heart attack*' when she thought hers had gone missing because '*I once lost mine in a nightclub and my mum was mad at me*'.

## **Affinity**

As Beyers et al. (2003) remind us, connectedness and autonomy are not mutually exclusive. In this study, there was considerable evidence of continuing bonds between participants and

their families. In particular, regular contact with home seemed to serve as a ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1988, p. 51) for participants, making it easier for them to spread their wings. In some cases, it was clear that bonds were not simply continuing by default, but proactively fashioned by participants.

### ***Continuing bonds***

Reinforcing the non-linear nature of the emptying nest, a strong sense of affinity and family interaction was evident among participants living away from home as well as those who had not yet left. As discussed above, the emerging adults in this study both assumed and accepted regular phone contact. Various scholars have identified the ‘secure base’ function of parents during adolescence (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005) and phone contact – or at least the potential for phone contact – seemed to offer our participants something similar. As Morven explained, *‘It’s quite nice, it’s like your parents in your pocket’*. Several participants talked about missing regular contact and feeling uneasy when they were on holiday and could not use their iPhones abroad. Thus, when she and her parents were away separately, Morven remembered *‘it was so strange, I knew I couldn’t contact them. Even if I really needed them, I just couldn’t, just couldn’t’*. Similarly, Sara talked about being away from her family and her phone during her gap year: *“it was more the texts that I missed and not having my mum’s or sister’s numbers etc”*. More positively, Millie’s iPhone connection to her secure base offered respite from her new environment: *‘It’s nice to be able to talk to people from home and kind of get away from the university a bit and have someone to vent to’*.

Turning to sibling relationships, ‘the least studied relationship in the family’ (Shortt & Gottman 1997, p.207), some niggles and monitoring of misdemeanours or petty annoyances (Kerrane et al. 2012) were reported, such as *‘I was listening to my music [via iPhone] because my little brother was annoying me’*, or *‘my [younger] brother is like, “yes I am revising”, but I know*

*he's on his phone*'. Overall, sibling relationships were presented as relatively benign, with no evidence of major tensions or significant power imbalances. Sibling affiliation and sharing were portrayed as part of 'the repetitive rhythms and rituals of everyday life' (Moore et al 2001, p. 291). Thus, Molly was pleased about having converted her older brother to iPhones, opening up another channel of communication between them *'cos he was here at Christmas and [we] played with mine...now we Facetime and stuff like that*'. Similarly, participants' diaries included entries such as *'FindiPhone app – showed my brother how accurate it was'*; *'Instagram - 2:30pm: look at new pictures and showed my brother how it worked etc.'* and *'Temple Run: my sister and I went on this together....we were both absorbed in it whilst playing'*. Whilst more problematic aspects of sibling relationships may have been raised had they been sought explicitly, the broadly positive tenor of siblings' iPhone-related interactions reported here are consistent with post-adolescence movement towards more egalitarian relationships (Shortt & Gottman 1997).

### ***Invested bonds***

Participants not only reported continuing bonds with family members; they also expressed a willingness to invest in them. Different degrees of investment emerged from participant accounts. In some cases minimal effort and easy compromises were required to maintain companionship:

*...My mum likes me to sit with her even though I don't like the same programmes as her but as long as I am sitting with her I can sit and watch something else on my phone, as long as I am there, that's what she quite likes.*  
(Lucy 18, home)

In other cases, continuing bonds were based on flexing their own communications practices to accommodate others. Distinct family micro-environments (Kerrane & Hogg, 2012) were evident, with iPhones used in different ways with each parent depending on their

circumstances, preferences, or skills. Thus, Kirsty and her father tended to have ‘*email conversations*’ when he was at work, whereas her mother called her to talk. In Millie’s case,

*I chat to my mum everyday with Whatsapp and sometimes we Skype usually if I’m out, but usually on computer or Facebook. Or my Dad who can’t figure out Facebook email but I do it all over the phone (Millie, 18, away)*

Hancock (2013) sees the departure of older children as reconfiguring sibling relationships, potentially aiding the younger siblings’ development. Certainly, once the nest starts emptying, contact with brothers or sisters is no longer constant and inevitable, but has to be arranged or agreed upon (Willoughby & Arnett 2013). Thus, Morven and her sister chose to meet up and go shopping:

*‘Like my [older] sister lives in Edinburgh and occasionally I will text her or call her, ‘cos we meet up every so often and go shopping or whatever, and I’ve got her on Facebook as well, it’s nice cos I don’t see her an awful lot even though she’s near and its quite nice to see what she’s up to, things like that’ (Morven, home).*

Morven wanted to follow developments in her big sister’s life, even at a distance. Her desire to ‘*see what she’s up to*’ may be a continuation of deep-rooted family dynamics, when younger children learn from, aspire to be like, or perhaps even define themselves in opposition to older siblings (Aquilino 2008).

Other accounts of iPhone-related sibling interactions in this study were from the perspective of older sisters or brothers. Thus, Amanda talked about her younger brother seeking reassurance from her and sending ‘*random*’ texts containing emoticons or simple ‘*hellos*’,

*...or if Mum and Dad are away and he’s changed his plans and he’s not coming home from school, he’ll text me to let me know... and I will get texts from him in school, like “can I borrow money?”, “can I come and find you?”, but we won’t, like if I’m away, sometimes he’ll text me like “when are you coming back?”, like if I am away for a week and he can’t remember, but not conversations, like two main things or random little pictures’ (Amanda, 16, home)*

Here, it seemed that emerging adults could be the ones to offer a ‘secure base’ to younger siblings, in some cases acting *in loco parentis*. Willingness to perform this role, even in relatively small ways, suggests an ongoing investment in sibling relationships.

### **Elective and selective bonds**

As Epp and Price (2008, p.52) observe, people make decisions ‘again and again – about whom to include as members of their family’. One of the transformations of emerging adulthood involves increasing autonomy in deciding who matters as family, and how to keep in touch with those in their inner circle. Several scholars have highlighted the important role of technology in maintaining contact between members of empty nest families (Tsai, 2011; Willoughby & Arnett 2013). In this study, participants offered many unprompted accounts of using their iPhones proactively to maintain contact with select family members, sharing both mundane experiences and special occasions via texts, Instagram, Skype, Whatsapp, FaceTime and Facebook.

Echoing Aquilino’s (2008) emphasis on the strong emotional bond often found between emerging adults and grandparents, participants frequently talked about maintaining such contact via their iPhones. As may be expected from digital natives communicating with their digital immigrant elders, reverse consumer socialisation (Moore et al 2001; Ekström 2007) seemed the order of the day. In this context, several stories were told of encouraging grandparents to buy iPhones (or iPads) and coaching them in their use:

*Layla: I’m trying to teach my Gran how to text*

*I: Is it working?*

*Layla: Nope but she can email and I’ll send her a quick one back saying “Hello Grannie, you are getting there” and she’ll call and like “Did it work, did it work?”*

*I: So why do you want her to do it?*

*Layla: Cos it’s nice for her to be like in touch and she says it makes her feel young.  
(Layla, 17, home)*



As a communication ‘node’ (Shove et al., 2012) offering contact via multiple channels at no extra cost, iPhones were also used to connect with particular extended family members in the UK or internationally. Thus, Lauren used Whatsapp to maintain contact with her cousin ‘*who’s in Dubai ‘cos that doesn’t cost you any money*’, and Amanda commented that ‘*I’ve got a lot of my extended family on Facebook*’. Similarly,

*...I have cousins who live down in England and a really baby cousin who’s only two, and a new one on the way. And obviously we can’t see them so on Skype you can FaceTime them[via the iPhone] and like ‘Ah Joe, he’s older now. Ahhh’ (Helen, 18, home)*

In general, these accounts portray participants continuing bonds with select members of their extended family in new ways. Consistent with the changing locus of control in emerging adulthood, iPhone interactions with these extended family members appeared to take place at participants’ initiative and on their own terms; independent contact via text or Facebook maintains family ties in very different ways from family trips orchestrated by parents to visit older relatives or distant cousins.

### **Collective individuation**

At times, a sense of the family as a collective unit – a distinctive ‘we’ - appeared to underpin participant accounts, consistent with a view of family identity as a ‘subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its present situation, and its character’ (Epp & Price, 2008, p. 52). This was particularly the case when participants referred to shared orientations towards iPhones and other Apple products:

*We’ve just gone Apple crazy. My Dad got an iPad for his birthday and my brother an iPod Touch. And general iPods. And my Mum is thinking of getting an Apple Mac next....and we have iCloud in the house so we all get each other’s apps (Rosie, 17, home).*

Such a sense of kinship via the Apple brand resonates with Holt’s (1995, p.9) discussion of consuming as ‘communing’, whereby a ‘mutuality of perspective reverberates between consumers, creating a subtle but powerful form of interaction’. Thus, participants’ accounts

of how their family use and value iPhones, iPods and iPads could be interpreted as classifying practice, building a sense of affiliation with their own family and setting it apart from those with weaker allegiance to the brand (Holt 1995). As consumption objects, then, Apple devices facilitated family cohesion; in other words, this shared allegiance constructed families as micro-level versions of Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) brand communities.

### ***Communities of (family) practice***

Beyond the sense of collective family identity based on a shared positive disposition towards Apple, shared practices such as choosing and using the brand, recommending apps, exchanging tips and advising one another on how to get the most from their Apple devices seemed to serve as a further bonding agent within the family. This portrays participants’ families as communities of practice, a group of people engaged in a joint project of some kind (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Within a community of practice, members engage in situated learning, drawing on and creating shared “practices, routines, situations, artifacts, symbols, commentaries, stories and histories” (Wenger, 1998, p. 6) as they hone not only their practices, but also their sense of belonging to the community.

Thus families devised ways, via the Apple devices, to bridge geographic distance to maintain their sense of family togetherness. For example,

*In the space of a month I think my family bought two iPad Touches and an iPhone. We just went like this because Dad works down in London and he can be down for up to a full week and my sister’s quite young, she’s only seven, so it’s good with the whole FaceTime thing, she loves that she can FaceTime him and I think he really likes that he can see us and everything so it’s good for that ... (Rosie, 17, home)*

Thus, rather than simply keeping them ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2011), it seems that iPhones and related technology could help participants and their families to be together apart.

iPhone practices could also foster a sense of everyday community between family members in the same location. Lorna's mother introduced her to the iPhone app 'Bejewelled Blitz', and 'now we sit and race against each other'. Furthermore 'her [mother's] boyfriend and my friends have it too'. Such fluid and sometimes reciprocal or reverse intergenerational influences (Moore et al 2001, Ekstrom 2007) were evident in participants' stories about the adoption of iPhones and other Apple products within their (often extended) families. The complexity of such family consumer socialisation is evident from the following exchange:

*Lucy: ... my Mum's got one and my Gran's got an iPod Touch and an Android phone ...my Mum's got an iPhone and I've got an iPhone.*

*I: Who got it first?*

*Lucy: My Mum and I got them at the same time*

*Helen: yes, I had mine first and then my mum got hers, my Nan got hers and my brother's just getting his and my cousins got them between my mum and my nana – mine was first but I think people were thinking about it before.*

*(Lucy and Helen, 18, home)*

As Lucy and Helen suggest, despite edging out of the nest, participants were still very aware of the intra-family dynamics involved as individual family members were socialised into and adopted shared iPhone practices. Furthermore, although particular family members displayed different usage patterns, interactions and even understandings of the technology, Apple devices and the resultant communication practices they enabled, appeared to form part of the shared understandings about what *their* family valued and how it behaved. Participants could - and did - improvise and seek to influence family communication practices as they edged out of the nest. This seemed easier to do as members of a community of family practice that had been established around iPhones and related Apple devices.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

At the start of this century, Commuri and Gentry (2000) called for more research on the transitions between stages of the family life cycle. More recently, a powerful case has been made for consumer research exploring ‘the coming together and pulling apart of families within and beyond household boundaries, concentrating on actions that produce family’ (Epp & Price, 2008, p. 60).

In this paper, we have sought to further both these agendas, by exploring emergent adult family consumption practices around iPhones in the emptying nest. Although previous research offers important insights into the challenges facing parents, particularly mothers, as they adjust to the empty nest (Hogg et al., 2004; Curasi et al., 2014), the marketing and consumer research literature is largely silent on what can be quite a lengthy period preceding this, as one or more children approach adulthood and begin edging out of the nest. In other disciplines, however, scholars have found emerging adulthood to be a rich and complex phase of the lifecourse with implications for family identity, communications and relationships (Arnett, 2004; Aquilino, 2008; Willoughby & Arnett 2013). Communication technology such as mobile phones allows empty nest parents and children to ‘communicate more effectively at a distance...[and] still share a part of their lives’, reassuring both generations that contact can easily be established in cases of emergency (Hogg et al., 2004, p. 249). The development of smartphones and growing interest in digital natives and immigrants raises new questions about how emerging adults use such technology to renew or reshape family relationships, yet this is an under-researched area (Coyne et al., 2013). The voices of emerging adults are rarely heard in the marketing and consumer research literature, and virtually silent in the context of family consumption. Our qualitative study used diaries and focus groups to better understand the experiences of young female emerging adults, reconfiguring their relationships as they anticipated or experienced

edging out of the family. Clearly, our findings are based on a small sample of young middle-class women living in suburban areas of central Scotland and any consideration of wider implications needs to reflect this. Nonetheless, this study identifies a range of family consumption practices revolving around digital communications technology which are unlikely to apply only in this particular context. It has shed some light on an under-researched area of family consumption as emerging adults pursue both autonomy and affiliation through their iPhone-related consumption practices with parents, siblings, grandparents and extended family members.

Participant diaries and discussions suggested the depth, breadth and warmth of their family connections. Although there were occasions where parental control and intrusion were contested, most of their accounts emphasised continued affinity and affection with family members, consistent with Arnett's (2004) account of a general shift from conflict to companionship in parental relationships following adolescence. Furthermore, as participants took greater control over decisions about how, and with whom, to maintain family ties, their voluntary connections embraced siblings, grandparents and other extended family members. There were signs of distinct family micro-environments (Kerrane and Hogg, 2012) as participants moved between texts, email, FaceTime, Skype, Whatsapp and Instagram according to other family members' circumstances, preferences and skills.

The socialisation processes recounted here were extremely fluid. Perhaps reflecting the digital native/digital immigrant composition of emerging adult families, various examples of reverse socialisation were provided; participants talked about encouraging grandparents, parents or older siblings to buy iPhones or other Apple devices, and taught them how to communicate using particular apps. Such socialisation activities and the sense of family identity created by

shared orientations towards and experiences of Apple devices created micro-level brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Of course, family ties are not so weak or superficial as to depend on everyone buying or liking the same smartphone brand, but our study suggests that iPhone-related practices did allow family members to perform and reinforce a sense of 'we-ness' or collective identity (Epp & Price, 2008).

Reflecting on their empty nest study, Hogg et al. (2004) observe that 'initially, role transitions are very difficult for individuals to cope with'. Our findings suggests that this is not always the case. Perhaps reflecting emerging adulthood's very gradual transition and its focus on possibilities (Arnett 2004), participants in this study seemed very positive about their changing position within their families as they left adolescence behind. Curasi et al. (2014) show how empty nest mothers' sense of loss resonated with theories of grief and bereavement. A key tenet of 'new wave' bereavement research emphasises continuing bonds between the living and the dead, on the basis that human attachment is so deep that it is altered rather than destroyed by the physical separation of death (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). As they edge out of the nest, perhaps it is easier for emergent adult children than for their parents to remain positive about what endures and evolves in their relationship rather than dwelling on what is being lost.

For marketing managers, this study highlights that emerging adults are still significant players within families even when absent. In the context of mobile communications technology, they introduced other family members to particular products and brands, coached them in their use, and engaged enthusiastically in modelling behaviour and word-of-mouth or advocacy in relation to the brands and features they valued. This suggests that marketers should not underestimate the continued ability of emerging adults, even those who have flown the nest, to

reach and influence other family members via mobile and digital technology. Indeed, participants' accounts of sibling monitoring and sharing, even when they no longer lived together, suggest that sibling influence on consumption choices remains important, even if it takes place virtually. Marketers tempted to treat emerging adults as independent consumers should take note of the finding that parents paid for the phone contracts of all participants in this study suggesting that purchase decisions made by emerging adults may not be as self-determined as they seem, making dual target marketing potentially relevant for this age-group as well as for younger children.

As well as highlighting everyday brand influence processes within family micro-environments (Kerrane & Hogg, 2012), this study highlights how the family, including the extended family, can have significant bearing on purchase decisions (Epp & Price, 2008) through the creation of micro-level brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). An understanding of how mobile technologies are woven into the fabric of family consumption is valuable to marketers seeking to position and promote brands. This is especially significant given the growing importance of mobile as a marketing communications channel (ZenithOptimedia, 2013) and evolving family practices around sequential and simultaneous multi-screen use, including mobile platforms providing immediate access to online purchasing mechanisms (Ofcom, 2013). This suggests that ethnographic studies of media consumption within families - at full, emptying or empty nest phases of the lifecourse - could make important contributions to practitioner agendas.

Turning to other potentially fruitful research directions, our study is based only on young women. Since previous research has found women more engaged in the 'kin-keeping' role (Epp & Price, 2008), a study of young men's smartphone-based family interactions may look

quite different, and this appears a promising research avenue to pursue. A study comparing male and female experiences would also be useful. In common with many studies of emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2008), our sample is relatively privileged and focused on those following a further/higher education route. Given the rapid diffusion of smartphone technology, there is certainly scope to explore how it is used within less privileged families. Our sample also contained limited diversity in terms of family structure and composition, and again other family contexts may be associated with different practices. The broadly harmonious relationships discussed by participants in this study call to mind Tolstoy's (1874-77, p.1) observation that 'all happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. This suggests that researchers interested in the dark side of consumption, or problematic family relationships, may find a study of digital communications practices within fractious families illuminating.

Since families are subject to a range of shifting cultural and institutional norms, and since mobile technology develops so rapidly, there is certainly a place for cross-cultural and longitudinal studies in this area. Last but not least, while we believe that this study contributes to knowledge by giving voice to emerging adults as a family members, we are conscious that theirs is just one voice among many in the complex network of family relationships, and much could be learned from a study exploring different family members' perspectives of how smartphone and other digital communication devices are woven into everyday family life and communications.

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