



New Consumers? children, fashion and consumption

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‘Pester power’ may be familiar to many parents of children trying to cope with ever increasing demands for the latest trainers, CDs, mobile phones and computer games. The fact that children now represent a considerable market for producers and retailers of such goods might be well known, but the significance of consumption to their lives and to childhood more generally is not. Taking children’s consumption of clothing as its focus, our research has attempted to understand the place and significance of fashion amongst 6–11 year olds in different regions of England. Working in detail with children in eight contrasting families over the course of a full year, the research has looked at the place of labels and logos in contemporary childhood. Our findings highlight parental concerns about inappropriate sexualization through clothing and at the same time challenge the idea that all children want to look like their favourite pop star or footballer.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 The consumption of clothing and the wearing of ‘fashion’ are important markers of identity as children grow older.
- 1 Influences from popular culture, especially pop stars and footballers, function as an important point of reference for children. Awareness of what is ‘cool’ and what is not was evident amongst children as young as six.
- 1 Access to the latest fashions which carried high status labels and logos could be significant in respect of children’s experience of social inclusion or exclusion.
- 1 Parents expressed concern over the ‘adult’ styling of clothes for children, especially girls. Girls’ fashions can provoke anxiety about the sexualization of young female bodies.
- 1 Evidence of growth in the childrenswear market has been steady rather than exceptional in recent years. Growth is more evident at the top, designer label end, though this remains a small percentage of the market overall, and at the value end of the market.
- 1 Whilst there is some evidence of a ‘loop’ between consumers and designers/retailers most companies adopt a centralized approach to marketing, design and promotion.

HIGHLIGHTS

Context of clothing: Data from the children have demonstrated their clear sense of suitability and acceptability. Often expressed in terms of not wishing to look silly, awful or out of place, children construct senses of

‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ which can govern dress codes as well as overall presentation of self/identity. In particular children expressed concern about what their friends would think of the clothes they chose or were required to wear. For some this emphasised the need to fit in, for fear of being wrongly judged by their peers. **Jessica (ten years old):** ‘People see what you look like before they realise what you are like. So they judge you before they really find out your personality. So you show your personality in what you are wearing’.

Parent/child dynamics: Concern here is with the ways in which children’s clothing consumption becomes part of family life. For example, the research has looked at issues around the family economy and the importance attached to purchase of children’s clothing. It has also considered the practice of handing down clothes and purchases made from charity shops and car boot sales. The consumer culture has encroached into parent-child relationships. Demands for particular items of clothing or those carrying sought-after designer labels can add tension to family life. At the same time, research has revealed instances of the latest designer outfits being used by parents as a means to express material wealth, where children in effect become ‘trophy’ of their parents’ perceived success. In addition, children’s influence on what their parents choose to wear has been highlighted, both by children and adults in the study, suggesting how generational boundaries can become confused, blurred and inverted.

Findings:

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”

Jessica (ten years old)

“

Well I don't know whether you are like us but if they want something that much, like you say, you feel pressured into buying it. You'll think 'Well I'll go without so and so and I'll get them that

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Mary (parent)

Mary (parent): 'Well I don't know whether you are like us but if they want something that much, like you say, you feel pressured into buying it. You'll think "Well I'll go without so and so and I'll get them that".'

Display: A range of interrelated issues are relevant here, all of which highlight the significance of clothing consumption as a key resource for children's creativity and self-expression. Displaying an image through clothes is an active process. Certain looks or images – cool, smart, sporty, slick, flashy – are not achieved by accident, often being purposely selected by children as a particular 'form' that their display will take.

Robert (eight years old): 'If you were like going out with your mates you'd probably wear your cool stuff because you don't want your mates to say they're rubbish.'

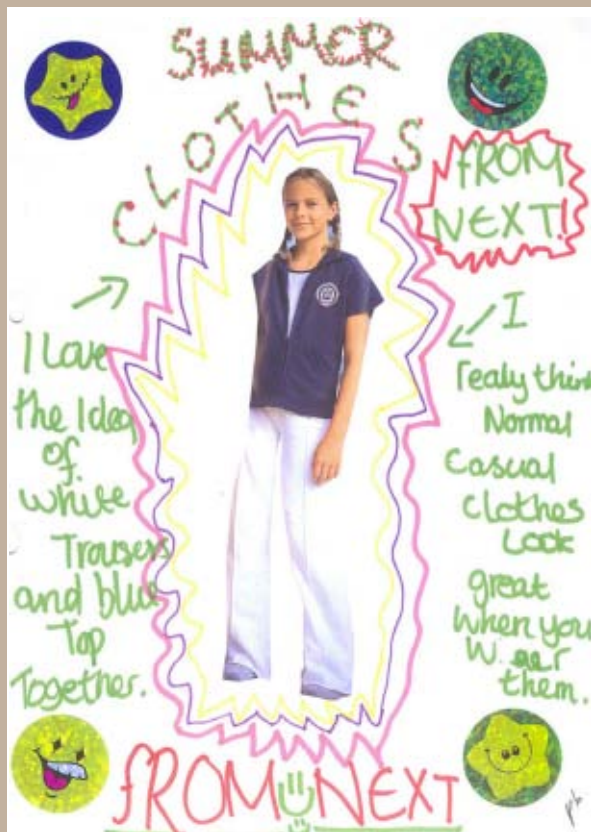
Key social variables: Our research highlights the material context for the purchase of clothing and its consequences for social inclusion and exclusion; the significance of labels and branding to the presentation

and interpretation of self; the purchase and use of clothing in accordance with cultural norms and the possibility of tensions between cultures; the material qualities of clothes (colour, embellishments, fabric, design, fit) that cause them to be associated with either boys or girls; the role of clothing (particularly for girls) in the sexualization of children and associated parental concerns; the significance of clothing to the expression of gendered identities and the way in which children learn about the gendering of clothing from the ways in which their parents dress.

Ashia (11 years old): 'I like Gap. I used to like New Look as well. They can have nice clothes but their clothes can be a bit tacky. I think sometimes they look a bit kind of cheap. But I have bought stuff from them because they have nice stuff sometimes. But Gap's the best but sometimes it can be quite expensive.'

Kate (parent): 'I mean if they are marketing flipping bras to a seven or eight year old it's a paedophile's dream isn't it?'

The clothes we like to wear: from Like and Dislike project completed by Katy, 10 and Tom, 8



Popular culture: Pop and sports stars, in particular, act as key influences and reference points in the lives of many children. Data have pointed to the concept of fashion, highlighting desires of children to construct and present a 'fashioned body'. Such influences are further related to cultural intermediaries such as television and print media, all providing key sources of information for children about the role of fashion and the consumption of image.

Suzie (nine years old): 'Avril Lavine has nice clothes too. I like her clothes because they are fashionable and I would always want to wear them. If I was a pop star I would usually wear flared trousers and lots of different types of vest tops.'

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Children's fashion is not all about fashion: Whilst there was evidence of a growth of fashion consciousness amongst children, and particularly those at lower ages, this was not expressed unanimously and neither was it perceived across all areas and groups. For example, children in rural areas of England often seemed more

concerned with the suitability of clothing for location and activity than with fashion and style. In addition, the recognised starting age for fashion consciousness amongst children varied significantly. More particularly, a range of other basic factors not necessarily related to fashion often came into play here including questions of colour, cut, fit, convenience, comfort and taste. Finally, some children also showed signs of resisting fashion as well as embracing it.

The adultification of children's clothing: This rather clumsy term refers to the ways in which children's clothing was perceived both by parents and the industry to increasingly replicate adult's clothing in some areas alongside the continuation of some more distinctively child only clothing. Particular anxiety centred on the linkage of this with the sexualisation of girls' clothing to include overly adult styles, particularly those which expose a lot of flesh. The role of store buyers here is critical in making judgements concerning good and bad taste but no set policies or regulation existed above and beyond that which may be imposed by safety

Findings: New Consumers: children, fashion and consumption

The dilemma for the new consumer: fitting in or standing out?

Photo: Alamy



or trading standards. Ironically, however, all of the industry representatives spoken to said they would not endorse or sell overly adult styles for children, which left open the question of quite where such styles were coming from.

THE STUDY

The New Consumers? children, fashion and consumption study (grant number RES143-25-0041) ran from April 2003 until September 2005 and was based in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester. The award holders were Dr Christopher Pole, Dr Jane Pilcher, Dr Tim Edwards and the research assistant was Dr Sharon Boden.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Pole C. 'Researching Children and Fashion: An Embodied Ethnography', in *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, 14(3), (Forthcoming 2006).

Boden S. 'Dedicated Followers of Fashion? The Influence of Popular Culture on Children's Social Identities', in *Media, Culture and Society* 28(2), (Commentary Piece), (Forthcoming 2006).

Boden S. 'Another Day, Another Demand: How Parents

and Children Negotiate Consumption Patterns', in *Sociological Research On-Line*, (Forthcoming 2006).
Boden S., Pole C., Pilcher J. and Edwards T. 'New Consumers: Children, Fashion and Consumption', in *Sociology Review* 15(1), (2005) pp. 28–32.
Boden S., Pole C., Pilcher J. and Edwards T. 'New Consumers? The Social and Cultural Significance of Children's Fashion Consumption', *Cultures of Consumption Programme Working Paper No. 16* (2004).
www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.htm

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context.

The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website
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