

Parental Purchase of Apparel for Preadolescents

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Children and preadolescents are one of the fastest growing market sectors in the United States. Total expenditures on children amounted to \$60 billion dollars in 1989, an increase of 25% compared to a general economic growth of 2% in that year (Gill, 1989; Newcomb, 1990). Besides the \$4.3 billion buying power of the 4- to 12-year old age group, children and preadolescents influenced parental purchases at an estimated level of \$132 billion annually (McNeal, 1987), of which an estimated \$11 billion annually was for parental purchases of children's clothing (McNeal, 1992a).

The growing power of children and youth as a market can be attributed to increased exposure to a variety of media, changes in family composition, changes in childbearing patterns, and changes in work habits during the past decade (Huston, Watkins, & Kunkel, 1989; Larsen, 1990; McNeal, 1992b; Santrock & Yussen, 1992; "Selling to children," 1990). Shopping for children's needs, once primarily a parental task, is increasingly becoming a shared responsibility between parents and children. McNeal (1992b) says that "today purchase decisions are increasingly being viewed by parents as part of the children's responsibility" (p.50).

Children are often present in the store at the time their clothing is purchased (Wingate, Gillespie, & Barry, 1984). McNeal (1987) refers to shopping excursions as a "training ground for children's consumer behavior" (p.15). Gill (1989) suggests that employed mothers bring children along to help with purchase decisions because they in a hurry when they shop. As a result, children as young as 2- to 4-years of age are aware of brand labels/logos and may exhibit strong product preferences (Gill, 1989; Henry & Behling, 1990; Zimmerman, 1992). The KIDTRENDS REPORT states that "kids aged 6 to 14 care a lot about the brands and styles of clothes they wear" (Guber & Berry, 1993, p.3). Guber and Berry further state that in contrast to breakfast cereals, soft drinks, and videotapes, "more kids lobby for brands in clothing than in any other area" (p. 78).

Another factor influencing consumption of children's products and children's consumer decisions is the peer group, of both the child and



parents. The middle school and adolescent years are times when the desire for integration with the peer group is particularly powerful. Conformity in appearance is a significant and convenient way to assure such integration (Kelly & Eicher, 1970; Rosenberg, 1989; Smucker & Creekmore, 1972; Storm, 1987). According to Storm (1987):

The typical child is desperate to have dress that fits in with that of his peers since this is often perceived as the only way that he believes he can become attractive. To force him to wear something he has rejected may be, for the child, the equivalent of moving one of his eyes to the center of his forehead or making an adult male wear a woman's hat (p.274).

In addition, a well-dressed child may be regarded as a status symbol among some parents (Kaiser, 1985; Larsen, 1990; Newcomb, 1990). Therefore, parents may be inclined to purchase goods for their children to enhance their own status among adult peers.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate parental consumer behavior regarding apparel purchase for preadolescents. Of particular interest were (a) factors most influential in parental clothing decisions and (b) parental perceptions of their preadolescent's clothing preferences.

Methodology

The researchers developed a 29-item Apparel Purchase Survey (APS) instrument to assess parental perceptions regarding preadolescent apparel preferences and parental purchase habits. Variables such as brand/label, price/cost, size/fit, preadolescent involvement in apparel purchases, and parental income level were among the factors investigated as possible mediating influences affecting parental purchase habits. The APS instrument was pretested for face validity with a group of parents and reviewed by a panel in the academic community.

Permission was obtained from a school district administration in a city in the southwestern region of the United States to contact the parents/guardians of sixth-grade students. The researchers delivered 600 questionnaires to the school administration office. One survey was

given to each sixth-grade student to be taken home to their parents. The result was a return of 103 usable surveys, a 17% response rate.

Respondents were overwhelmingly female (84%) and members of two-parent families (70%). The sample consisted of 67% Caucasians, 25% Blacks and a small percentage (8%) of Hispanics, Japanese and Native Americans, which closely profiles the community from which the sample was taken. Almost half the subjects (42%) had annual family incomes ranging from \$20,000 to \$49,999, while 35% reported annual family incomes of less than \$20,000. The fact that respondents were overwhelmingly female is consistent with previous findings that mothers assume the primary responsibility for selecting young children's clothes, although fathers may make some special occasion or gift purchase (Rucker, Boynton, & Park, 1986; Stone, 1965).

Data were examined and reported using frequency counts, ranges, and percentages. Categorical variables were subjected to chi-square analyses to test the independence. Statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$. Sample size among survey items varied due to multiple response items and incorrectly answered or unanswered survey items.

Results

Parental Factors

Size/fit was ranked by 45% of the respondents as the most important factor influencing clothing purchases made for preadolescents. Other influential selection factors, in rank order, were: price/cost (31%), style/design (19%), and brand/label (5%).

Parents were also asked about their preadolescent's role in the purchase process. More than 90% of the respondents reported that preadolescents were present when apparel purchases were made and/or involved in the purchase decision at least some of the time. Over half (59%) of the respondents ranked clothing of friends as the most important factor influencing their preadolescents' apparel preferences. Peer clothing was more important than other factors such as parental clothing preferences, family income, media advertisements, and clothing store displays.

The majority (75%) of the respondents considered it important for preadolescents to dress like their friends. Also, 72% of the parents expressed agreement with the statement, "My child's clothing and appearance reflect favorably upon me as a parent."

Preadolescent's Preferences

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of their preadolescent's clothing preferences. Parents reported that preadolescents frequently (27%) or often (46%) comment about clothing items they want to own. Preadolescents' comments are most often related to style/design (25%), brand/label (17%), and clothing worn by peers (16%). A majority of the respondents (78%) reported that preadolescents are sometimes or always unhappy with a clothing item other than the one of his/her own choice.

Conclusions

Conformity in visual details such as hairstyle, footwear, and apparel facilitates identification and acceptance within the peer group (Kaiser, 1985; Storm, 1987). Findings of the study confirm the influence of friends' clothing on preadolescent apparel preferences and the importance that parents place on purchasing clothing that enables preadolescents to dress like their friends. These results provide further evidence that peers serve as significant consumer socialization agents.

Difficulties related to size and fit may account for the high ranking of this selection factor and the degree of involvement of preadolescents in decision making and shopping. Physical growth is extremely uneven among preadolescents (Wingate, Gillespie, & Barry, 1984). Some preadolescents find that apparel in pre-teen or prep sizes provides acceptable fit while others must search for apparel in adult size ranges.

The finding that brand/label is the least important factor influencing adults' purchase of preadolescents' clothing is consistent with current market research (Struensee, 1992; Zimmerman, 1992). While the literature suggests that children are affected by concerns about apparel labels (Rosenberg, 1989), this study demonstrates that adults are less concerned with brand/label of preadolescents' apparel, and more concerned with size/fit and price/cost. Using consumer focus groups, Zimmerman (1992) found that children reported that their parents claimed to understand peer pressure, yet resisted going along with the children's apparel choices. In Zimmerman's view, children use brand names as a way to make certain they are making the "right" choice from the overwhelming abundance of products in the

marketplace. However, it appears that though respondents in this study acknowledged the importance of preadolescents dressing in a manner similar to their peers, other factors, such as price and fit, take priority over conformity in dress.

Implications for Consumer Educators

Results of this study provide additional insight for parents and educators regarding consumer behavior and the purchase of apparel for preadolescents. During the formative years, preadolescents develop attitudes toward money and patterns of spending that carry over into adult life (Pare, 1988). The trend toward "shared responsibility" for apparel selections by parents and preadolescents provides parents and teachers with opportunities to influence the development of good consumer behavior habits in preadolescents.

Schools are encouraged to help students develop skills enabling them to make intelligent decisions (Pare, 1988). Teachers can incorporate consumer awareness activities that are applicable to preadolescent students' interests and experiences. For example, students' interests in apparel preferences can serve as a vehicle for teaching economics concepts such as opportunity costs (foregoing one purchase for another), substitution (selecting sale items or another brand rather than desired brand name items), economic needs and wants (purchasing one coat rather than several coats/jackets), and delayed gratification (saving money to purchase a special outfit or achieve a long-term goal). This approach would have a two-fold benefit for students: (a) gaining economic knowledge and (b) developing consumer awareness.

Pritchard's and Myers' (1992) activity suggestions for high school students may also be adapted for students at the intermediate level. For example, students may keep a journal of shopping excursions and record the apparel items purchased, the costs involved, and their feelings and reactions regarding the items purchased. Students may describe their perceptions of peer reactions to their apparel choices, parental reactions to their stated apparel preferences, and the impact of these reactions on the final purchase. One desirable outcome of the journal activity would be an increased understanding of their own consumer behavior and habits and the purchasing behavior of their families. The journal could be included in a teaching unit on the topic

of human development that focuses on peers as socializing agents, decision-making skills or budgeting, or apparel purchasing.

Parents can include preadolescents in planning and implementing a clothing budget for the new school year, an activity that could foster the development of money management skills. In addition, parents can train preadolescents to recognize and compare factors such as brand/label versus cost when shopping for apparel items. For instance, a preadolescent may have to choose between one pair of brand name jeans or two pairs of jeans that cost less, but are not a recognized brand.

Rosenberg (1989) recommends that the best time to talk with children about clothing-related peer pressure is before preadolescence when peer pressure becomes stronger. To reach younger children, consumer education information can be disseminated to parents of preschool and school-age children through programs at day care centers, Parents and Teachers Association meetings, and apparel industry sponsored promotional events. Additional educational strategies may be created or developed by teachers and parents based on interests of preadolescents. Greater awareness of the need for developing good consumer behavior habits will allow teachers and parents to take advantage of "teachable moments" as they interact with preadolescents.

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Brenda Cude, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist at the University of Illinois and a long-time ICEA member, has been chosen for the 1994 National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC) Consumer Participation Program. NAIC is the association of the chief U.S. insurance regulators. It writes model legislation and regulation for use by states. There are currently over 100 NAIC models.

NAIC accomplishes functions through a system of task forces, committees, subcommittees, and working groups. The Consumer Participation Program is designed to ensure that the consumer's voice is heard, not just the views of the regulators or industry.

NAIC considers a wide range of insurance issues. Some priority issues for this year as they relate to consumers are:

Redlining: Unfair discriminatory practices by companies deny consumer access to affordable, quality insurance.

Health Care Reform: States and the federal government must work together to guarantee consumers meaningful choice and high quality care standards.

Life Insurance Disclosure: NAIC is considering prohibiting the use of future projections of rate of returns except those that are guaranteed.

Senior Insurance Issues: Seniors are often easy targets for companies and agents more interested in profit than providing value. The NAIC continues to work to develop projections in long-term care and Medicare supplement insurance.

For more information about NAIC, write to Brenda at the University of Illinois, 271 Bevier Hall, 905 S. Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801.