

Educating the Young Consumer: Advancing the Understanding of Clothing Product Quality

Deborah J. C. Meyer, Kansas State University
Sara J. Kadolph, Iowa State University

Introduction

Marketers have a new target—children; children exert a great deal of power buying products and influencing family expenditures. Consumers 8-18 years of age spent more than \$31 billion in 1998, with expenditures divided equally among the following categories: a) food and beverages; b) toys; and c) clothing, entertainment and personal-care items (Janoff, 1999). It is during the preadolescent years of 8 to 12 that children begin building a foundation of product knowledge and making product decisions (Meyer & Anderson, 2000). Some children as young as four have made their first independent purchases, although the median age for a first purchase is age eight (McNeal & Yeh, 1993).

As children have become targets of marketing plans, the responsibility of teaching them to be responsible consumers and to sort through hundreds of media messages falls on parents and educators. It seems that educating youth about how to select clothing has been left up to marketers. Zollo (1999) found that children were influenced by brand names and what the brands represented; hence, massive marketing campaigns tout agents such as Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, and Adidas. As a younger market segment purchases greater amounts of apparel products, it is vital that young consumers be given information on how to make product judgments.

Importance of Quality

It may be a relief to know that young consumers claim to look for quality when purchasing clothing; however, few researchers have looked at this important issue (Anderson & Meyer, 2000; McNeal, 1987; Zollo, 1999). It is known that marketers may influence what adolescents define as quality. For example, Zollo found that teens appreciate and look for quality; in fact, two-thirds of the teens interviewed associated "cool" brands with quality. Adolescents reported that they appreciated quality, and that "quality is cool." Nowhere in the study, however, is quality defined according to apparel attribute characteristics. Apparently, when adolescents interpret a marketing campaign message as "cool," they assume clothing products under the brand must be of high quality.

Parents, who may not completely understand what constitutes quality in clothing themselves, may be influencing their offspring's definition of product quality. Anderson and Meyer (2000) found that regarding price, quality, brand name, and style, preadolescent children (8- to 12-year olds) acknowledged that quality was the most important attribute they looked for when shopping for clothing. When asked to define quality, children in the study reported that quality clothing should be durable and long lasting. Parents of the children in this study said they often shopped in department stores because they offered better quality clothing, an opinion mimicked by their children. This may represent a very important step in the consumer socialization of children.

Product Quality Defined

Quality of clothing products is a complex concept, and may be misunderstood by consumers of all ages. According to Kadolph (1998), many consumers still hold a naïve notion of what constitutes quality, a kind of "you'll know it when you see it" attitude (p. 13.).

Miller and Stafford (1997) state that for consumers to benefit from the money spent on clothing, they need to recognize the signs indicating clothing durability and increased length of life. Thus, consumers must be familiar with the two key indicators of quality clothing, fabric content and construction (Miller and Stafford). However, most experts in the field of apparel quality contend that these are just two of many cues that should be used to define clothing quality (Kadolph).

To understand the complex nature of clothing quality, one must realize that definitions of clothing quality vary widely depending on the consumer, the producer, the intended end use, and the characteristics of the product. Indeed, Kadolph (1998) states that "quality is defined as the total of the characteristics that help describe the overall object or service" (p. 13).

Serviceability as a Dimension of Quality

According to Kadolph (1998), the following dimensions of apparel quality must be defined by producers when quality is to be established: performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality. When focusing on the preferences of the young consumer, serviceability is the key dimension that should be emphasized for apparel product quality. Serviceability can be defined simply as how well a product satisfies a customer's needs and performance expectations. These needs and expectations can be examined with respect to six distinct components: aesthetics, durability, cost, comfort, care, and appearance retention.

Aesthetics describes the appearance, fit, fashion preference and styling of a textile product (Kadolph, 1998). If a garment does not fit or gives an odd appearance to the body, the overall perception of the product quality falls. For fashion conscious consumers, if the style is unacceptable or perceived as being too far removed from

current standards of fashion, then the product will not please the consumer.

Durability can be defined as "how long a textile product will be usable for its intended purpose" (Kadolph, 1998, p. 28). Anderson and Meyer (2000) found that young consumers considered durability of clothing, or how long a product lasts, as important. It is key that the consumer establish the end use of the product when viewing durability as a dimension of serviceability. For example, long life of blue jeans may be very important for a young consumer purchasing the jeans with the intention of wearing them for many months. However, durability may be of little interest to the adolescent who is purchasing a dress for a dance and only expects to wear the dress for the single occasion.

Cost is the amount of money a consumer spends on a given item. Apparel products are available in different price ranges and consumers often equate higher priced items with better quality. The relationship between cost and quality may influence the expectations that young consumers will have for a product. For example, Anderson and Meyer (2000) reported that if young consumers pay premium prices for clothes, they expect them to be durable and long lasting. Unfortunately, higher priced items do not always indicate better quality. For example, manufacturers of blue jeans may make similar products under different brand names to sell to different stores, such as discount retailers and department stores. Although the jeans are essentially the same, prices can vary greatly depending on the retail outlet chosen. Thus, cost is a component to consider when purchasing apparel products, but price alone does not indicate whether a product will be of high quality. According to Kadolph (1998, p. 30), "(c)ustomers assume that the price of a product is directly related to the inherent value of the item. Although this may be true in terms of intangibles, such as fashion and brand name, it does not mean that quality is equal to value or that quality is equal

to durability. Often moderately priced products produce the greatest value for the amount paid."

Comfort is an important dimension of serviceability, for if a garment is not comfortable, the perceived quality is diminished. Comfort may describe fit of the garment on the body, the way the product feels to the touch, how warm or cold it keeps the wearer, whether it helps or impedes movement, or even if a tag rubs against the neck.

Care can be defined as "how the product responds to the procedure(s) recommended for returning a soiled item to its clean and as near-to-new condition as possible" (Kadolph, 1998, 31). If any of the product features that originally attracted the consumer are compromised during the cleaning of the product, the consumer may perceive the quality of the garment as lower.

Appearance retention is closely related to care, but can also be affected by storage and use. Loss of color while in the sun, stretching caused by hanging in the closet, or general aging of the product components can affect how a garment performs and thus how it is judged for quality.

Aspects of serviceability have direct implications for the introduction of clothing quality to junior and senior high students. For example, if the garment is cared for and does not perform as expected, i.e. pants that have been washed according to directions yet still shrink two inches, the serviceability of the clothing product has been affected. The attributes of product aesthetics, comfort, care, and appearance retention have been altered. Product cost, another area of serviceability, also can be discussed as part of the clothing product failure equation with respect to quality.

Implications for Educators

Although junior and senior high school Family and Consumer Science classrooms are ideal settings in which to teach clothing

quality¹, opportunities also are available in elementary school to help children understand this complex issue. Small units in elementary math can demystify the relationship between cost and quality, instead focusing the younger consumer on the concept of value. Units in science focusing on the sun's energy would be an excellent way to discuss how the sun's rays affect colorfastness in clothing and how this may affect a product's appearance retention. Durability issues can be discussed in science class while examining different types of fibers (cotton, polyester, wool, etc.) under a microscope and relating fiber selection in clothing products to end use. Opportunities abound to teach the components of quality in apparel products.

References

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Endnote

¹For additional discussion and specific teaching techniques for high school students, please see:

Meyer, D. J. C., Kadolph, S. J., Cosbey, S., Hillery, J., Haar, S., Day, M., Keiser, S., & Brandes, K. (2001). Integrating quality into the textile and apparel high school curriculum. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 93(4), 84-87.

Deborah J. C. Meyer is Assistant Professor in Apparel, Textiles and Interior Design, Kansas State University, 216 Justin, Manhattan, KS 66502. (785) 532-1314; FAX: (785) 532-3796; email: dmeyer@humec.ksu.edu

Sara J. Kadolph is Professor in Apparel, Educational Studies and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University, 1055 LeBaron Hall, Ames, IA 50011-1120. (515) 294-3012; FAX: (515) 294-6364; email: skadolph@iastate.edu