

# Clothing Consumption and Teen Identity

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to take a look at the role of brands in the life of consumers and particularly, in the life of adolescent consumers. What I have to command is representative of events in the lives of teenagers in the U.S. but it has application for college-aged individuals as well as young adults. I am particularly interested in understanding relationships between the concept of brand and the development and maintenance of self.*

**Key words :** clothing consumption, brand, identity

## I . Introduction

Teenagers as well as adults place importance on brands. Teens in the U.S., and perhaps here in Korea, want to own and wear specific brands. Manufacturers are aware of the power of their brands and employ different strategies to get teens to wear their brands. Their assumption is that if you get the popular teens to be brand advocates, others will follow in their adoption of the brand. One strategy used by manufacturers to get teens to use their brand is called seeding. Seeding involves giving apparel or other branded products to popular cliques within high schools in the hope that the brand will spread among the crowd's fashion followers (Quart, 2003).

Another technique used by manufacturers is product placement. Similar to the process of having a product worn or used by an actor/actress in a movie

or television program, manufacturers hire popular teens to wear their clothing calling this process "real life product placement"(Quart, 2003, p.44). These teens are practically walking advertisements for the brand. It is understandable why some teens would want to be advertisements for brands. They may think their efforts bring them closer to the brand or they may mistake brand names for real identities.

Many of today's teenagers were born after the development of the Disney stores(1987) and after the brand-as-destination concept became key to the development of urban and suburban space. These teens have grown up in a world where Nike is not just a shoe; it is an experience, that is, Niketown. Corporations sponsor a growing number of high schools in the U.S. and textbooks used in classes often have examples or problems that make references to brands such as Nike(Quart, 2003). The branded stores, the product placement of brands in movies, and in their schools and textbooks has created an

overvaluation of brands in teen's minds. Quart (2003) contends that these brands provide teens a sense of selfhood before they even recognize that they have a self.

## II. Clothing and the Self

Most of you are familiar with symbolic interactionism, the work of Gregory Stone, and his article *Appearance and the self*. In this work Stone (1962) presents his ideas concerning how the self is established and shaped through aspects of your appearance, most notably clothing. Stone argues that clothing is a symbol that has meanings attached to it. Because of the meanings of clothing, clothing can be used to identify others. At the simplest level we can typically identify the gender of another on the basis of their clothing because in most cultures there is gender specific clothing. In addition to identifying another's gender, additional characteristics might be assigned concerning attitudes and probably behaviors on the basis of clothing.

To successfully communicate these characteristics about yourself, you need to know what the clothing symbols mean and have some idea about the self that you intend to share with others. Individuals can, with clothing and other appearance symbols, construct an image. They can review that image and the personal characteristics they intend to communicate in light of the social response they desire from others. This separation and objectification (view of self as object) allows people to shape their appearances so only certain information is communicated about the self and to correct the image if the right information is not communicated.

Evidence that there is a strong connection between women's clothing use and communication of the self comes from research by Guy and Banim

(2000). These researchers investigated the ways in which women relate to and experience their clothing in everyday life. They found three interdependent views of the relationship of clothing and the self. They labeled these relationships as "the woman I want to be", "the woman I fear I could be", and "the woman I am most of the time." The woman I want to be was concerned with the use of clothing to enhance their appearance or project a positive image. These comments reflected instances where the women's understanding of their self and that their bodies clicked with the use of a particular set of clothes to communicate that self and received appropriate feedback from others. The clothing said, this is who I am and others responded, yes that is who you are!

The woman I feared I could be was concerned with all that clothing styles owned that were buying mistakes. These are the clothing styles you look back on and say, "what was I thinking when I bought this?" Because of the negative feedback concerning this clothing and the unintended comments, the women began to question their judgment about clothing.

The woman I am most of the time reflected comments that noted the women were taking time off from thinking about clothing or trying to achieve a satisfactory image without too much effort. These are the times that you stay in your bathrobe! Or for teens this is the day they wear their pajamas to school!

Clearly, the adult women in this study saw distinct connections between their "selves" and their clothing. They also saw the self as a dynamic process because they shared that some previous clothing styles they wore were no longer suitable to express the person they were or the one they were becoming. In addition, these adult women's comments suggest

that they have an established sense of self and look to clothing to communicate that self. It appears that the women use an apparel brand to communicate a recognized sense of self rather than use an apparel brand to determine who they are. The question I have is whether the same can be said of teenagers who may have a less established sense of self? Do teenagers say this is the person I want to be so I must own and wear a specific apparel brand? Does their clothing express their personality or the personality of the brand?

### III . Brand and the Self

Historically, teens might have used clothing to express their individual personalities by sewing their own clothes. During the 1960s and 70s in the U.S., learning how to sew was part of the required curriculum for young women in public schools. When I first thought about clothing as an expression of me, I thought about my early efforts at sewing and trying to create something (e.g., a skirt, a top) that no one else owned and because no one else owned it, was a true expression of me. As sewing has been removed from the required curriculum of most schools, what do teens and young adults today have to use to engage in the process of using clothing to establish and maintain a sense of self? Do consumers in general and teens in particular, look to advertising and brand images to establish self?

According to Quant (2003) teenagers do buy an identity. Teens buy a whole set of clothing from one manufacturer typically at that brand's boutique. They become Prada or Pacific Sun girls. Top brands are like celebrities and wearing the brand puts the teen in proximity to stardom. The most famous brand is the coolest and teens, by wearing

the brand, become the coolest as well.

### IV . What is a Brand?

Everyone has an idea of what a brand is. Everyone in this room probably has a favorite brand of apparel. When a retailer or manufacturer is building a brand, what is it exactly that they are building? Let's begin to answer this question by first agreeing on what a brand is not. A brand is not a person. People die but brands live on. A brand is not a company. Companies get bought out and ownership changes but the brand lives on. A brand is not the store or the merchandise within the store. Both of these become outdated but brands can stay up-to-date.

What is a brand? A brand is a promise (Underhill, 1999). A promise that is publicly conveyed to consumers by everything they can observe about the brand (e.g., name, logo, advertising, treatment by representatives of the brand, storefront, displays, catalogs, news articles and even other customers of the brand). A brand's promise includes all the beliefs, feelings, associations, and expectations that a person experiences when exposed to the brand.

In order to develop the promise of a brand, a retailer or manufacturer focuses attention on three related parts: brand positioning, brand personality, and brand affiliation. A positioning strategy defines the way the consumer is supposed to think about a product. A positioning strategy makes it clear to the consumer who the brand is intended for, how the brand is different from the competition, and what makes your brand unique. For adolescents in the United States, and perhaps here in Korea as well, the goal in making a brand successful for adolescents is for teens to think that the brand is for them and that it is cool.

How do you make a brand cool? One of the dominant methods is through advertising, the primary method manufacturers use to inform consumers about their products. The example I share combines television and advertising and shows the impact on teen culture. The first step is to develop a television program popular with teens. One such program in the United States is MTV (Music television). MTV is a show that features music videos and advertising. Next, hire a group of teens and pay them to act excited about a product featured at an event like a concert or a runway fashion show. In the example I share it is a concert event and the product you want teens to like is Sprite—a soft drink. Videotape the teens acting excited about the product at the event. Then show the video to another group of teens on that popular teen program (MTV). Since peer influence is so important to teens, the audience who wants to be cool will follow the behavior of the cool group of teens featured in the video that they view on the popular television program and the brand's popularity increases!!

Once positioning has been established for the brand, a personality has to be built. In many categories of products, it is the brand's personality that is the one and only factor that consistently separates the brand from its competitors. This is especially true in apparel brands. The goal in establishing the brand's personality is to establish an emotional relationship between the brand and consumers. What is the brand's personality? It is the set of human traits that the brand communicates in relationship to its customers. To a consumer a brand's personality should be just like a person. A brand's personality has the same type of predictability that an individual has to the consumer.

Ock sale. Kmart is not certain how the asso-

ciation between Kmart and the now, convicted felon Martha Stewart, is going to impact their business. Will Kmart customers continue to purchase products associated with a criminal?

In addition to a personality, a brand also has to have affiliation. Humans are compelled to associate with others like themselves, people that they admire (hence the use of celebrities to build a brand's personality), or people they want to be. All strong brands convey an imagery of users that suggests and takes advantage of this basic human behavior. Brand affiliation is concerned with the process of how people come to believe others will perceive them as a result of being a known user of the brand (Underhill, 1999). Will others think you are high status, smart, sophisticated as a result of your Channel suit or Manolo Blahnik shoes?

The positioning, personality, and affiliation of the brand determine the intellectual, emotional, and ego appeals of the brand. Thus, if an apparel brand is working correctly, your clothing labels will mean something about you (Quart, 2003). The question at this point is how are these brand attributes (brand position, personality, affiliation) communicated to consumers and what does communicating this brand information mean to consumption and the establishment of a sense of self?

## V. Branded Environment

Television, in US culture, is a major vehicle for bringing people information about brands through commercials. In the U.S., an average of three years of our lives is spent watching television commercials! Television is one of the most powerful socializing and acculturating forces in society. Since television is such a large part of our experience, (average time spent watching television has been

reported to be 3 to 4 hours per day) television must play an important role in teaching us about life and about brands. In addition to television commercials teaching us about brands, brands are also advertised as a result of product placement. They are inserted into television shows. We see our favorite actors and actresses talk about and use brands such as Prada, Nike, and Calvin Klein. One such television show in the United States is *Sex and the City*, which was one 5-year advertisement for designer labels. In addition to television programs and commercials, the average individual in the US is exposed to about 3,000 print advertisements a day (Berger, 2004).

The advertisements that we see tell us something about the values that are central and distinguishing characteristics of a culture because advertising of a brand is intended, as I noted earlier, to inform us of the brand's positioning, personality, and affiliations. For this reason, brand images represent societal goals and encourage individuals to behave in ways that are consistent with these goals. Consumers are exposed to these brand images and are consciously or unconsciously encouraged to pursue them (McClelland, 1961).

Does advertising convince the consumer of the value of the brand and motivate purchase? The practical answer is that manufacturers and retailers would not be spending millions of dollars on advertising if advertising were ineffective. However, if you asked people whether all the advertising they are exposed to affects them, chances are the average person would say no. Why? According to Berger (2004), people answer no to this question because advertising's effect is not a simple process of seeing an advertisement and then running out to buy the product. Advertising affects people in a general manner. Berger describes advertising's impact

as a cultural force.

Advertising's impact as a cultural force may work something like the following. You take the subway home and are exposed to large billboard advertisements featuring new clothing styles. Paging through your newspaper or favorite magazine you are exposed to retailer advertisements detailing the new clothing styles. Once you get home, you check your mail and find a catalog sent to you from your favorite retailer featuring information on what is "new" for fall. With repeated exposures to new clothing styles in a short period of time, the style you are wearing begin to look out-dated to you. People no longer notice what you wear or complement you on how you look. You may not say I need a new pair of Prada shoes or a Chanel suit but you begin to say, I need something new. And when you shop for that something new, you are likely to recall the brands you have been exposed to repeatedly through advertising and as a result, shop for them.

In the U.S., teenagers are not only exposed to the advertising located in subways, billboards, on television, in movies, or magazines, they are also sent information on brands directly in their schools. So what are the consequences growing up in this branded environment on teens and on their sense of self?

## VI. Potential Consequences

*Eating disorders.* What do these brand images of teens do to teenagers? If teens become branded individuals and embrace their favorite brand, what possible harm could come from it?

Quart (2003) pointed out ideas about what you have to be in order to be acceptable as a person is being shaped by the branded culture we are living

in. We are all familiar with the physical ideals that are presented to us through the media and the notion that in order to feel attractive many teens think they must be only a specific size or shape. We are all familiar with the link between advertising and body image problems or the link between advertising and eating disorders in teens. Most of us would agree that eating disorders represent negative behaviors. I just learned about a new underground group of teenagers called the pro-anorexia teens or pro-anas. These are a group of young women who love anorexia. These teens connect with each other through the Internet. They chat about starvation methods, their feelings, and their hatred of fatness. According to Quart (2003) these girls take on their anorexia like an identity. One pro-ana noted

“It is extremely disheartening to be faced with these extremely tall, thin, beautiful girls wherever you go...And if you could just be as thin as these women, then maybe you'd be as happy as they appear and just maybe instead of your guy looking at the billboard with lust they'll look at you that way” (p. 127).

*Working adolescents.* Quart contends that heavy-duty brand advertising from childhood onward has “warped the social lives of teenagers and exacerbated caste snobbery” (p. 14). Rather being judged on the basis of beauty (the pretty and popular that some of us grew up with) teens judge each other on the basis of brands they wear. And the teenager's obsession with brands has changed adolescent leisure time. In the U.S. 55% of high school seniors work more than 3 hours a day while 27% of foreign students report that they work at all (Quart, 2003). Although some may suggest that working instills a positive work ethic, others suggest that kids work primarily to consume more goods

than they could without working.

If teens cannot obtain the desired brands by using the money earned through working, they may borrow money using credit cards to purchase. Credit card debt by students averaged \$2,327 in 2001. Teens may also try to acquire brands by stealing them. We have repeated incidents in the US of teens being killed for the branded clothing that they wore (O'Neal, 1997). Are we allowing teenagers to work for the wrong reasons? Are we placing our children in danger by allowing them to wear branded clothing?

*Brands designate social position.* Teenagers' obsession with luxury brands (e.g., Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Chanel, Burberry) is strong and related to the interest teens have in obtaining the trappings of adulthood while still underage (Quart, 2003). It is common for mothers and daughters in upper-middle-class area to wear the same expensive brand of clothing. While mothers try to look 12 years younger, daughters try to look 12 years older. Do brands alone provide a sense of accomplishment and achievement?

*Teasing and bullying.* Teens who are unable or unwilling to purchase the popular brands may experience teasing or be shunted into an “outgroup”. While some teens find nonacceptance by others to not be a problem, others may retaliate as evidenced by school shootings. In 1999, two students who had been teased for years gunned down 12 high school classmates and a teacher before killing themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (“Monsters among us”, 1999). In 2001, a ninth grader shot and killed two students and wounded two others as a result of being “picked on”. Incessant teasing about choice of clothing, being shy, and religious beliefs contributed to the suicide of a 12-year-old girl in Michigan (Hunter, 2001).

Has so much emphasis been placed on brands that we are putting our children at risk?

*Compulsive buying.* Compulsive buying is another potential fallout. If teens believe the act of wearing an apparel brand will bestow upon them a cool identity and if they do not get the desired response from others as they wear this brand, they may find themselves in a continuous cycle of buying. At risk may be our own students! Jennifer Yurchisin and I (2004) found in a study of 305 undergraduates, that 15% of them were compulsive buyers and the majority of this group were retail merchandising majors. We argued that "majors in clothing design and retail merchandising may be at risk for developing compulsive buying habits as a result of their repeated exposure to idealized images in their coursework in design, marketing, promotion, and advertising. These images may be associated with expectations concerning wealth and consumption and direct or indirect comparison may lead to feelings of inadequacy and heightened efforts to present the correct image through the possession of and use of material goods" (Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004, p. 309). Are young adults caught in a consumption cycle? Are we encouraging excessive consumption in our students?

*Over consumption.* Overspending and wasteful spending may result from overemphasizing brands. Growing up in a social context where model's bodies are used to sell products and lifestyles may result in teens feeling significant pressure to purchase whatever it takes to become part of that image and lifestyle. In one year alone, (2002-2001) the number of cosmetic surgeries on teens 18 and under jumped 21%. In 2000, breast augmentation was the third most popular surgery for people 18 and under. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, rate of liposuction and breast augmentation increased by 386% and 476% respectively between

1992 and 2000. In this age of branding it is common for teenagers to consider one breast that is smaller than the other as a physical deformity or small breasts to be horrific aberrations (Quart, 2003). Do these young women think that through cosmetic surgery they are buying social acceptability? And these breast augmentations that these young women need to have. Does this practice reflect the desire to normalize an appearance or to sexualize one? Do teen girls wish to make themselves into erotic objects of consumption? Is the body simply something to be processed, plucked, and subdued according to will? What role has advertising played in fueling cosmetic surgery in teens?

In addition to the increase in cosmetic surgeries in the U.S., there is a growing makeover trend. In addition to having your yard, home, or a room made over, we have in the U.S. we are referred to as extreme makeovers. Individuals are made over from head to toe at no small expense in the hope of shaping a new self.

*Counterfeiting.* Does counterfeiting result from this intense desire for luxury brands? Findings from another research project (Cho, Yoo, & Johnson, 2004) on attitudes toward counterfeits and future intentions to purchase counterfeits suggest that counterfeits are fueled by consumer demand for the look of the luxury brand at a low cost. Even though participants understood that the presence of counterfeits was damaging to manufacturers, they planned on purchasing them.

In closing, there are many research avenues to pursue to understand the impact on teens, as well as other consumer groups, of living in a branded culture. As I noted earlier, my potential research questions include the following: whether consumers in general look to advertising and brand images to establish a sense of self? What role does branded

clothing plays in establishing and maintaining a sense of self? What personality is being communicated through the use of branded clothing? Is it the personality of the individual or the personality of the brand? Do we shop in search of self? Is our mantra "I shop, therefore I am?"

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