

# **Preadolescents and Apparel Purchasing: Conformity to Parents and Peers in the Consumer Socialization Process**

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Preadolescents are spending more money on consumer goods than any other time in history. Although the interest in the adolescent (children aged 13-18) market has stimulated much research, little attention has focused on the years of preadolescence, ages 8-12. During this period children begin making product decisions and building a foundation of product knowledge. Information about the preadolescent child and the important role that conformity to parents and peers plays in apparel purchasing is necessary for researchers and educators to understand how these consumers are socialized. The purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which conformity motivators influence shopping behavior among preadolescents, especially with regard to clothing purchase criteria and shopping independence. Overall, this research found that preadolescents are exposed to and influenced by the behaviors and opinions of others, often using clothing to conform to peer groups as early as age 8. Analysis also indicates that as preadolescents age, both normative and informational conformity motivation increase in apparel purchase decisions. These conformity factors influence how children shop, who they shop with, and what they purchase.

Once a silent part of the consumer market, children now purchase more consumer goods than in any other time in history. Little research exists on the purchase behavior of preadolescents (children aged 8-12), their role in family economics, and the influence of media and peer influence on purchase behavior. During this period children begin making product decisions and building a foundation of product knowledge (Ward, 1974; Shim & Gehrt, 1996). Recent research has shown that children may begin shopping independently as early as age 4, although

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the median age for a first purchase is age 8—the beginning of preadolescence (McNeal & Yeh, 1993). In 1998 alone, of the \$31 billion dollars spent by children ages 8–18 approximately one-third was spent on food and beverages, one-third on toys and one-third on clothing, entertainment, and personal-care items (Janoff, 1999). Therefore, it is important to understand this age group and the role parents and peers play in consumer socialization.

The purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which conformity motivates apparel shopping behavior among preadolescents, especially with regard to parental and peer influence in the apparel purchase process.

### **Conformity**

Social influences are strong variables in the susceptibility of individuals to peer and reference groups. Individuals, both young and old, will observe and respond to the actions of others in their reference groups, especially those individuals who are aspiring to similar characteristics (Cialdini, 1984). For this reason, as children mature, parental influence will often decrease while conformity to peer groups increases (Bearden & Randall, 1990; Gesell, Ilg, & Ames, 1956). The willingness of adolescents to conform to a peer group will usually occur as a result of trying to fit in, which in turn provides security and encouragement from others in the group (Anderson & Meyer, 2000). One of the most visible ways of “fitting in” is to wear clothing similar to those in the contactual or aspirational reference group (Kelley & Eicher, 1970; Littrell & Eicher, 1970). Conformity to groups can also be seen in younger children (Gesell, Ilg, & Ames, 1956; Harvey & Rutherford, 1960). It is during the ages of 8 to 12 that children spend more time in school becoming socially acquainted with peers while decreasing time and dependency on parents (Stone & Church, 1973).

Reference groups can affect consumer choice in three principle ways: (a) normative compliance, (b) value expressiveness, and (c) informational influence (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993). Normative and informational influence are regarded to be the most widely used by consumers in the decision making process (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

During the product purchasing process, a consumer may choose to seek normative social influence, which is often accomplished through the process of compliance or identification. This occurs when an individual is motivated and influenced by the behaviors and opinions of others, which he/she perceives as a positive representation of the reference group (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). An example of normative social influence in clothing choice was examined by Midgley, Dowling

& Morrison (1989), who found that 6 out of 9 styles that peers favored most were considered highly favored styles by study participants.

There are two ways an individual will use informational influence as a method of obtaining product knowledge and social acceptance. Individuals may actively seek information from an opinion leader or from a group seen as having expertise regarding the product in question. The second way an individual may use informational social influence may occur when the individual seeks to obtain credible information by observing the behavior of others who are important in their lives. Classic Yale group studies concluded that sources of high credibility play a significant role in determining conformity (Hovland, Janis, Kelley & Weiss, 1951). A number of studies have identified various patterns of active informational search, including obtaining information from peers, using media, and consulting salespersons (Claxton, Fry, and Portis, 1974; Midgley, 1983; Moschis, Moore, and Stephens, 1977).

Normative and informational motivators will not only influence individuals in *what* they buy, but also *how* they buy. Research by Ward (1974) indicates that although parents become less important socialization agents as children reach adolescence, the skills and attitudes learned early are important determinants of adult buying behaviors.

Conformity motivators also may have a leading effect on whether the consumer conducts the purchase process independently or dependently. This is the extent to which the young consumer may depend on others, such as parents or peers, during the time of the purchase. Research found that adolescents were more dependent on their primary caregiver/parents when purchasing certain clothing items such as coats, underwear, and shoes. The consumption of other specialty goods, such as records and sporting goods were more often purchased alone or with friends (Moschis, Moore, & Stephens, 1977). The extent to which preadolescents and adolescents differ in clothing purchase practices was explored in a study by May and Koester (1985). Results from this study reveal that the youngest age division, juniors (9–12 years of age), shopped mostly with their parents who were largely responsible for their child's clothing purchase decisions regarding style, color and fashionability. In the intermediate ages (13–15 years of age), girls showed greater consideration for style, color, and what their friends wore when deciding what clothes to buy. Although concern for peer association is apparent in this age group, the greater influence of parents dictated final purchase decisions (Kelley, Geiger, & Baily, 1975).

Results show that the oldest group of girls, seniors (16–19 years of age), tended to make decisions based on what they saw or heard in the media and were socially influenced by what their peers were wearing.

Overall, this study demonstrated that parental influence was significantly higher in younger adolescent shoppers than with older adolescent shoppers. In another study on parent/child shopping behavior, Francis and Burns (1992), investigated consumer socialization by examining the long term effect of parents on clothing shopping attitudes, acquisitions, and satisfaction. This yielded similarities between mother/daughter pairs for clothing acquisitions and for overall clothing satisfaction.

## METHODS

A convenience sample composed of 200 male and female preadolescents was obtained using a mall intercept method in a regional shopping mall in the Pacific Northwest. Mall intercept is a "face-to-face or personal interviewing method" whereby people walking through the mall, in this case, preadolescents and their parents, are approached and asked to participate in a survey (Bush & Hair, 1985, p. 158). Using this method, a convenience sample based on a quota of 200 preadolescents was obtained. In order to obtain accurate demographic information such as family income and ages of family members, parents or primary caregivers of the children interviewed were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire. The parent survey was administered to 75 participants who had one or more children interviewed in the preadolescent survey. Additionally, fewer parent surveys were filled out due to a number of parents (approximately 20%) who gave permission for preadolescents to participate in the study, yet declined to fill out the parent survey.

## Measures

The preadolescent questionnaire consisted of 21 Likert-type and open-ended questions. From a previously developed marketing scale by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) 5 normative and 3 informational questions were used that focused on consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Coefficient alpha reliability estimates for the informational and normative factors were 0.82 and 0.88, respectively. Four questions about shopping independence were formulated using a study on purchasing patterns of adolescent consumers by Moschis, Moore, and Stephens (1977), as well as four additional questions developed to determine whether preadolescent shoppers purchased apparel items alone or with others. These questions resulted in an alpha reliability estimate of 0.84 for the present study.

## Procedure

Each interviewer was given explicit verbal and written directions regarding the formal procedure of administering the survey to partici-

TABLE 1    Age and Gender of Preadolescent Participants

<i>Age</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
8	31	11	20
9	21	12	9
10	41	13	18
11	46	22	24
12	61	30	31

pants. Preadolescent participants were asked a series of questions with the assistance of an interviewer, who then recorded the participants' responses on the survey form. The purpose of conducting an interview-type survey was to give participants the opportunity to further communicate beyond the given scales if necessary. This allowed the surveyor to record any additional comments respondents expressed when answering questions and assured completeness in answering all questions.

Parents or primary caregivers were asked to complete questionnaires to obtain demographic information such as income, family members and ages, and buying expenditures per family and preadolescent child. The parents/primary caregivers were asked to complete the survey during the same period in which the preadolescent was participating in the interview.

## RESULTS

Of the 200 preadolescents sampled, 88 were male and 112 were female. Table 1 outlines the breakdown of participants by age. Data from the 75 parents/primary caregivers surveyed, indicated that yearly household income levels ranged from less than \$20,000 to over \$50,000 per family. Over 30% of parents surveyed had yearly incomes over \$50,000 per family. This contrasts with U.S. Census data that reports that approximately 40% of all households in the United States had an income above \$56,020 in 1999 (Bureau of the Census, 2000). Results from the parent survey found that families had one (25.7%), two (40.5%), or three (21.6%) children living at home. Of families with children living at home, one (66.2%) or two (23%) were preadolescents. According to parent responses, monthly clothing expenditures ranged from less than \$50 per preadolescent child (43.2%) to between \$50-\$100 per month per preadolescent child (52.7%). None of the parents stated that they spent more than \$100 a month per preadolescent on clothing purchases.

TABLE 2 Gender and Age Comparison of Preadolescent Shopping Partners

<i>Item</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Both Parents</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Sibling</i>	<i>Alone</i>	<i>Don't Shop</i>
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	88	61%	1%	14%	19%	0%	3%	0%
Female	122	68	1	8	21	1	0	2
<b>Age</b>								
8	31	74	3	16	0	3	0	3
9	21	95	0	5	0	0	0	0
10	41	68	2	17	10	0	0	2
11	46	70	2	4	17	0	7	0
12	61	44	0	10	46	0	0	0

Note: % rounded to nearest full number

### Shopping Behavior and Independence.

One objective of this study was to determine to what extent preadolescent shopping practices are performed independently. Results show that the majority of preadolescents shop with one or both of their parents rather than by themselves. As shown in Table 2, approximately 61% of males and 68% of females shop mostly with their mothers. Although 13% of males and 8% of females reported shopping with both parents, shopping alone with fathers represented only a very small percentage of the responses. Overall, the majority of male and female preadolescents reported purchasing clothing items with their parents. However, by the time they reached 12 years of age, over 45% of participants reported shopping with friends for some clothing items. As can be seen, as children age they shop more with friends and less with parents, exhibiting an increasing independence in their purchasing roles and spending power.

This shopping independence at an earlier age than has been found in previous research may help explain why shopping malls have become a popular recreation site.

T-test results indicate that significantly more females than males go to the mall with friends for recreation (see Table 3). A significant difference also exists between how often 11- and 12-year-olds go to the mall with friends as compared to 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds.

When viewing age versus gender comparisons, three of the five age categories show a significant difference between males and females, with females more likely than males to go to the mall with their friends for recreation. Significant differences surface between 8-year-old males

TABLE 3    Frequency of Going to Mall with Friends as a Form of Recreation by Gender and Age

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Gender</i>			
M	2.51	1.47	88
F	2.90*	1.51	112
<i>Age in Years</i>			
8	1.54	.88	31
9	1.66	.96	21
10	2.26	1.36	41
11	3.21**	1.41	46
12	3.63**	1.34	61
<i>Age in Years/Gender</i>			
8/M	1.18	.04	11
8/F	2.10***	1.44	20
9/M	1.91	1.08	12
9/F	1.33	.70	9
10/M	1.53	.77	13
10/F	2.60***	1.44	28
11/M	2.68	1.39	22
11/F	3.70***	1.26	24
12/M	3.50	1.43	30
12/F	3.74	1.26	31

\* $p < .05$  significant difference between males and females.

\*\* $p < .05$  significant difference means of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds and 11- and 12-year-olds.

\*\*\* $p < .05$  significant difference between males and females within same age category.

and females, with females going to the mall more often than males, however, by the time children are 12-years-old, the difference between males and females shrinks dramatically. Several general conclusions can be made about preadolescent shopping behavior. First, children are shopping alone and/or with friends beginning well before their teenage years, and secondly, females appear to start shopping with friends at an earlier age than do males.

As can be seen in Table 4, as respondents become older they also exhibit more independence in shopping for all items of clothing, while parental shopping involvement decreases. As preadolescents decrease shopping with parents, the incidence of making a purchase while with friends at the mall increases. Overall, females buy clothing more often than do males when at the mall with friends. Results also show that the older preadolescents (11- and 12-year-olds) purchase clothing items

TABLE 4 How Often Clothing Is Bought at Mall While with Friends by Age and Gender

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Gender</b>			
M	2.20	1.28	88
F	2.80*	1.43	112
<b>Age in Years</b>			
8	1.77	1.25	31
9	2.23	1.33	21
10	2.19	1.47	41
11	2.91**	1.31	46
12	2.98**	1.29	61

\* $p < .05$  significant difference between males and females

\*\* $p < .05$  significant difference means of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds and 11- and 12-year-olds.

significantly more often when shopping at the mall with friends than do 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds.

Shopping independence appears stronger in several clothing categories. Generally it can be said that less expensive clothing items are purchased more frequently with friends than are more expensive items. By the time children reach 12 years of age, almost half of respondents reported purchasing caps/hats, t-shirts, and jewelry with friends or by themselves at least once. Although the majority of preadolescents still purchase clothing with a parent, the influence friends exert on the purchase process is evident. According to qualitative answers on the parent survey, many parents indicated that the preadolescents contribute to the decision-making process when purchasing clothing items, often taking into account what the child's friends like and are wearing.

Normative influence can be measured by determining how important it is to preadolescents that peers like the clothes they purchase. As can be seen in Table 5, both male and females indicated that it is somewhat or fairly important that peers like the clothes they purchase. Eleven- and 12-years-old participants considered it to be significantly important that others liked the clothes that they buy compared to 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old preadolescents. Interestingly, broken down by age and gender, 12-year-old males had a higher mean than did 12-year-old females. As can be seen, means of importance for age groups indicate that as preadolescents age, they become more sensitive to others' opinions and will try to conform to those in the peer group, at least in clothing behavior.



TABLE 5    Importance That Peers Like Clothing Purchases

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Gender</b>			
M	3.69	1.31	88
F	3.13	1.37	112
<b>Age in Years</b>			
8	2.67	1.57	31
9	2.71	1.61	21
10	3.17	1.28	41
11	3.65*	1.23	46
12	3.90*	1.55	61
<b>Age/Gender</b>			
8/M	2.32	1.60	11
8/F	2.40	1.53	20
9/M	2.44	1.58	12
9/F	2.91	1.67	9
10/M	3.15	1.40	13
10/F	3.17	1.24	28
11/M	3.95	1.09	22
11/F	3.37	1.31	24
12/M	4.23	0.85	30
12/F	3.58	1.14	31

\* $p < .05$  significance found between the means of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds and 11-, and 12-year-olds.

As preadolescents age, they also show a tendency to value their friends' fashion opinions more (see Table 6).

Both female and male participants reported that they value their friends' opinions a little bit to somewhat on fashion trends, with value increasing as children age. A comparison by ages and gender indicates that both males and females, ages 10, 11, and 12 place a higher value on their friends' fashion opinions than do 8-, and 9-year-olds. When interviewers asked participants why they valued their friends' fashion opinions, both male and females responded that they; 1) either like how their friends dress, therefore want to look similar to them, or 2) trust their friends' opinions on the latest styles and want to dress according to what their friends say. Twelve-year-old females placed significantly more value on their friends' opinions regarding fashion than did 12-year-old males, however, it is interesting to note that 9-year-old males valued their friends fashion opinions more than did females of the same age.

TABLE 6 Value of Friends Fashion Opinions

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Gender</b>			
M	2.79	1.33	88
F	2.87	1.34	112
<b>Age in Years</b>			
8	2.16	1.31	31
9	1.95	1.07	21
10	2.87*	1.41	41
11	3.00*	1.36	46
12	3.34*	1.07	61
<b>Age/Gender</b>			
8/M	2.18	1.47	11
8/F	2.15	1.26	20
9/M	2.08**	1.16	12
9/F	1.77	0.97	9
10/M	2.84	1.57	13
10/F	2.89	1.37	28
11/M	3.00	1.34	22
11/F	3.00	1.41	24
12/M	3.13	1.40	30
12/F	3.54**	1.02	31

\* $p < .05$  significant difference in means between means of 8-, 9-, & 10-year-olds, and 11-, & 12-year-olds.

\*\* $p < .05$  significant difference in means between males and females

Not surprisingly, all respondents reported that they buy clothes a little to somewhat often according to what their peers and or friends wear (see Table 7).

Once again, as children age, so does their desire to buy clothes based on what their friends and peers wear. There is a significant difference between 11- and 12-year-old respondents and the lower age groups in the frequency they buy clothing according to what their friends/peers are wearing. In the 9- and 11-year-old age categories there is a significant difference between males and females, with females purchasing clothing according to what their friends/peers wear more often than males.

### Purchase Criteria

According to Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1993) normative social pressures can influence clothing selection criteria such as brand name. Preadolescent participants were asked to rate the importance of

TABLE 7    Frequency of Clothing Purchased According to What Peers/Friends Wear

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Gender</b>			
M	2.57	1.35	88
F	2.46	1.33	112
<b>Age in Years</b>			
8	2.06	1.06	31
9	2.00	1.22	21
10	2.48	1.55	41
11	2.84*	1.55	46
12	2.90*	1.28	61
<b>Age/Gender</b>			
8/M	2.09	1.04	11
8/F	2.05	1.09	20
9/M	1.83	1.26	12
9/F	2.22**	1.20	9
10/M	2.30	1.43	13
10/F	2.57**	1.61	28
11/M	2.77	1.26	22
11/F	2.79	1.44	24
12/M	2.96	1.42	30
2/F	2.83	1.15	31

\* $p < .05$  significant difference between means of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds, and 11- and 12-year-olds.

\*\* $p < .05$  significant difference in means between males and females within same age category.

four clothing selection criteria: price, brand name, style, and quality. Results of means by gender are reported in Table 8. Clothing quality was rated as most important by 88% of all females and 81% of all males. A significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) was noted between the means of all females and males, with females ranking clothing quality higher than males. Males rated style and quality as equally important. Clothing quality proved to be significantly more important as a clothing selection criteria among female 12-year-olds ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) than male 12-year-olds ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). Although previous literature reported quality as a significant purchase criterion among adolescents (Zollo, 1999), that it is an important purchase criteria for preadolescents had never been documented. This reveals that children are exposed to the issue of clothing quality at a very young age.

TABLE 8 Purchase Criteria Important in Clothing Selection

Item	Gender	Mean	SD	n
Price	M	4.03	0.90	88
	F	4.20*	1.12	112
Brand Name	M	3.35*	1.49	88
	F	2.65	1.60	112
Style	M	4.18	1.10	88
	F	4.27	1.07	112
Quality	M	4.17	1.20	88
	F	4.44*	0.95	112

Total N = 200

\* $p < .05$  significance between females and males

The majority of preadolescents surveyed defined quality qualitatively as the durability of the garment. They felt clothes should resist holes, broken zippers, and have longevity. Even at the age of eight, preadolescents expressed concern about buying clothes that wear-out prematurely. Older preadolescents felt that if they are paying premium prices for clothes, they should be durable and long lasting. It may be that preadolescents feel the importance of purchasing quality clothing products at such a young age due to influence from their parents. Over 67% of parents said they shop at department stores more often because of better quality clothing items. This may be a very important step in the consumer socialization of children with parents demonstrating the importance of locating and buying quality clothing.

The second most important purchase criterion was style as rated by 79% of male and 81% of female preadolescents, although no significant differences between males and females was found. Style was an important purchase criteria among all age groups but especially with 10-year-olds of whom 93% rated style as very important ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Preadolescents rated price and brand third and fourth in importance. A significant difference was reported between males and females that considered price as an important purchase criteria, with females rating price higher than males. However, 12-year-old males ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) considered brand name significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more important than did 12-year-old females ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). This is somewhat surprising as previous research about adolescents indicated a stronger brand consciousness today than ever before (Zollo, 1999). However,

brand was clearly not as important a purchase criterion as quality, style, or price.

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to examine the extent conformity motivates apparel shopping behavior among preadolescents, especially with regard to parental and peer influence in the apparel purchase process. Information about the influence of parents and peers on the preadolescent child is necessary to understand how children become consumers. By researching how preadolescents respond to normative and information conformity factors, levels of shopping independence, and the purchase criteria important to this age segment, retailers and manufacturers can better serve consumers and themselves. While based on self-report, the results here are informative.

The influence that individuals have on each other has been recognized for some time in academic research. Individuals appear to act in a manner that is consistent with social groups with which they identify. From a consumer behavior perspective, a reference group often influences the products an individual selects. Past literature indicates that young people begin to develop consumer related skills, knowledge, and attitudes during adolescence (Clum & Eicher, 1972; Shim & Gehrt, 1996; Ward, 1974). It is apparent from this study that consumer socialization begins before adolescence. Overall, data from this study demonstrate that preadolescents begin to use clothing to conform to peer groups as early as age 8. Although the majority of children still make clothing purchases while in the company of their parents, they exert influence over parents in their desire to buy clothing according to what their friends or peers think is fashionable and what they wear.

Results show that preadolescents, some as young as 8-years-old, are going to the mall with friends and purchasing some items without parental guidance. Preadolescents also reveal that as they become older they are more likely to go to the mall with friends as recreational activity, and while at the mall, preadolescents will increasingly shop for inexpensive items.

One of the most surprising findings of the study was that quality is one of the most important reported purchase criterion preadolescents look for when shopping for clothing. Qualitative answers of respondents show that quality was defined as clothing that is long lasting and durable.

As the present study was composed of a convenience sample drawn from the Northwest United States, it has limited generalizability and further research should be conducted to explore whether these findings are supported in the larger population. Additional research about preado-

lescent clothing consumption and consumer socialization of the preadolescent child needs to be pursued to understand this increasingly important consumer segment. It is also important that we explore conformity motivators of children younger than age 8, as the very young are becoming consumers at an earlier age than any other time in history.

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