

Dedicated followers of fashion? The influence of popular culture on children's social identities

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This commentary examines the extent to which popular culture acts as a key influence and reference point in the lives of children, with particular focus on the concept of 'fashion' and the consequent consumption of children's clothes.¹ In doing so, I identify two substantive aspects of popular culture which appear influential on the desires of children to construct and present a 'fashioned body'. The first influence is sport, including the activity itself, the associated brands and logos, and the styling of popular sports stars, and the second is pop music, its stars, their videos, their outfits, overall image and lifestyle, and their own clothing lines. 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. This commentary will go on to show how popular culture influences interact with children in complex, highly nuanced ways: they can, for example, impact on the clothing/body interface, altering children's self-styling and the presentation of their identity; influences can be used to help create perspectives on clothing, helping a child to formulate ideas and express opinions; and they can drive new 'wants' and purchases, initiate shopping trips and encourage children to select their clothes according to current trends or certain 'looks'. I conclude that the concept of 'fashion', and its portrayal within certain aspects of popular culture, play a key role in defining children's social identities.

Children and fashion: contextualizing issues, changing times

There are three interlinked issues that need to be examined before starting to analyse the primary data that have been collected with children themselves.² These are: contemporary consumer culture and its obsession with celebrity, the children's wear market and its transition from traditional children's clothing to more adult-like styling, and the status of the 'tweenager' as a significant social actor and consuming force.

Taking these three issues in turn, celebrity and commodification indeed go hand in hand, the former being a 'thing' that needs to be continually produced to be consumed. As Rojek (2001) has argued, celebrities are cultural fabrications that embody social types and provide role models. These sociocultural functions are assisted by a range of intermediary factors that operate and stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public. While celebrity status can be achieved via a number of means – being on a reality TV show; having a famous person as a partner, sibling or parent; having a high-profile political career; starring in one of nation's favourite soap operas – the bulk of individuals considered to be celebrities in today's highly commercial and globalized popular culture are drawn from the spheres of sport and music. Chung (2003), for instance, in his analysis of the comparative celebrity status of a South Korean sports star and a rock star concludes that above all else they are both essentially '“cultural products” of post-industrial capitalist society'. Sports, for example, according to Chung (2003), prizes traditional values such as hierarchy, patriarchy, male supremacy, heterosexuality and nationalism, and awards wealth and fame to those who have proven their athletic ability and can maintain their awarded status on and off the field. Sports businesses and sports media, moreover, are emerging as key components of the new global political economy (Cashmore and Parker, 2003). Needless to say, this increased exposure of sports stars via television coverage and commercial promotions, not to mention their rocketing earnings, has led to a number of individuals being raised to iconic status. Most notable, perhaps, is footballer David Beckham who has become the subject of a number of analyses (Burchill, 2002; Cashmore 2002; Cashmore and Parker 2003; Whannel, 2002). Beckham is hailed as a benchmark of social change, not only as the quintessential exemplifier of conspicuous consumption but also as a 'fashioned' representation of shifts in masculine constructions.³

Pop stars, equally, are influential figures in popular culture. According to Hawkins (2002), commercial pop is about patterns in consumption and production. In other words, the pop scene evolves stylistically with new artists showcasing their images and artists with longevity needing to continually reinvent themselves to engage with the identity politics of the time. Madonna, for example, builds her identity on changing and often contradictory fashions and images and, in doing so, offers us a vision of a woman liberated from prescribed gendered codes of dressing and behaving (Chung, 2003; Schwichtenberg, 1993). So too, the Spice Girls used clothing to emphasize different aspects of their personalities, offering their audience a choice of female typologies ('Posh' always wore classic, black, cocktail dresses, 'Baby' preferred baby-doll dresses in pretty pastel colours, while 'Sporty' was rarely seen out of her tracksuit). As with the sports scene, pop music has been commercially enhanced through global television networks where MTV and many other music channels can visually promote the spectacle of the performing artist.

This leads me to discuss the concept of 'fashion' itself and how it functions within the children's wear market. In 2003 the UK children's clothing market was worth £6.02 billion – accounting for 18.9 percent of the UK's total clothing expenditure – with the 'fashion' end of the scale rather than traditional children's wear being the ever-growing sector (Just-style.com, 2004). This translates on the high street into a shift away from more traditional chains such as Adams and Marks & Spencer's to shops offering more trendy, covetable items (often celebrity copy-cat clothes) such as New Look and George at Asda. Lifestyle brands producing surf- and skateboard-related clothing are also making their mark as fashionable alternatives to bland, nondescript casual clothing lines.

Accounts of what 'fashion' is and does, and how it relates to self, whether more historical (Breward, 2003; Keenen, 2001) or sociological (Craik, 1994; Edwards, 1997; Entwistle 2000) in nature, pay equal attention to the context or broader external influences that enable the production of a certain 'look', and the physicality of the 'look' itself, especially how it intertwines with social identities and relationships (Breward, 2003: 63). In other words, and for the purposes of this present piece, not only do we need to discuss how fashion draws from popular culture but we also need to profile the social actors who consume those fashions.

It is at this stage that I introduce the 'tweenager' – a media-constructed age category that describes an expanding and increasingly powerful social group. Quinion (2001) has defined tweenagers as children aged 7–11 who are more worldly-wise, fashion-conscious and media-aware than children of this age used to be. Wider socio-economic factors have led to the emergence and market significance of tweenagers. Rice (2002) situates tweenagers thus: they have lived through a decade of economic boom and are now therefore fairly affluent, they are often from small families with dual earners ensuring households with sizeable disposable incomes, they are able to draw upon strategies such as 'pester power' to get their own way, and they have a high awareness of labels, media and technology. All in all, according to Rice, the affluent, aspirational and apparently sophisticated tween consumer is maturing much faster than his or her predecessor. What then, we may ask, does the cultural world of the tweenager entail and what of the part played by those they hold up as cultural icons?

Pop stars and sports stars: cultural icons or commercial manipulators?

I begin this section by examining what exact function pop stars serve in relation to tweenagers and their own fashion consumption. A number of issues have been suggested by the research. First is the physical imitation of pop stars in which the self-styling of children is undertaken primarily to match that of their idol(s). This imitation was evident in a number of my visits with Robert, an 8-year-old boy from a small town. I enquired as to why he wanted so desperately to purchase what he described as a 'cool beany hat':

Sharon: And who wears these? Are they what the footballers wear? The pop stars?

Robert: Like Eminem.

Kate (Robert's mother): Busted and Eminem and things like that

Sharon: Do you like Eminem? Are you a fan?

Robert: Yeah.

Sharon: He wears all the baggy clothes.

Robert: Yeah, I've got them on.

On this occasion Robert was indeed wearing a baggy Manchester United hooded sweatshirt in dark grey-blue with red writing and baggy dark grey combat jeans with a silver chain hanging from the pocket – the chain he admitted served no real purpose other than being 'just for fashion'. Another time I visited him he explained how he had intended to dress himself up for me in imitation rapper-style:

Robert: I just like wearing clothes. You know, like pop stars like the brown boys they wear like white vests and then a denim jacket . . .

Sharon: The what boys?

Robert: The black guys when they are like . . .

Sharon: Oh black guys, sorry I thought you were on about a group. Like rappers?

Robert: Yeah rappers, like that, Eminem he wears like a white vest and then he wears like denim jacket over it. I was trying to find my vest and I was going to wear it over so like a vest but a really thick one. Like that vest and then put my denim jacket over it. But I couldn't find it.

Pop stars can also shape the styling of children in a more direct way, namely via the release of their own-brand lines of clothing onto the children's wear market. This is not always a guaranteed success, however, as children seem to place equal value in which shops they get their clothes from and to what extent the design of the garment advertises the fact that it is from a celebrity-endorsed or -designed range. Direct associations with pop stars, in other words, are not able to override other key aspects of fashion consumption for children. As Suzie, an 11-year-old girl from the south-east of England, explained about pop group Liberty X's fashion line:

Suzie: Well the thing is you get their clothing from Woolworths and I wouldn't really think you would buy like clothes from Woolworths.

Sharon: And do all of Liberty X's range have LX on?

Suzie: Yes they do or they have it on the label.

Sharon: And is that one of the things that you don't like, the fact it's so obviously a Liberty X one?

Suzie: Yes.

Pop stars are used by children to formulate clothing–personality associations, which can then go on to structure their own consumption patterns and how they view the clothing choices of their peers. In other words, children seem able to identify the fashion sensibilities of different types of pop stars through their choice of colour, fit and exposure of bare skin. For example, US rock band Linkin Park are described as wearing 'baggy rock kind of clothes' (Joseph, 14, from a Midlands city), while Avril Lavigne is 'Gothic and skatey altogether' because she 'wears quite lot of like dark clothes. Not always black' (Heather, 10, from a small town).

Suzie (aged 11, from the south-east of England) talked to me about the differences in styling between female pop stars Beyoncé and Avril Lavigne using pictures she had drawn of the two women to aid her descriptions:

Suzie: Avril Lavigne 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.

Sharon: Oh right. So Avril Lavigne is a bit more sort of casual isn't she?

Suzie: Yes.

Sharon: And Beyoncé sort of dresses up a lot more doesn't she?

Suzie: Yes.

Sharon: And what have you dressed her in here?

[Suzie has drawn pictures of the two singers]

Suzie: Erm they are sort of combat trousers and just a T-shirt [i.e. Avril].

Sharon: And a hat.

Suzie: Yes a denim one with a baker boy type. I like them.

Sharon: Oh I know, yeah, yeah. And what's Beyoncé got on?

Suzie: A short vest top.

Sharon: Yeah, because that's her belly button isn't it?

Suzie: And a short mini-skirt and some really high heels.

The fashion sensibilities of Avril and Beyoncé are therefore portrayed by Suzie as polar opposites of each other – grungy casual versus sexy glamour. This categorization enabled Suzie to consider where her own fashion consumption would be situated in relation to the two pop stars. She remarked:

Suzie: I like Beyoncé and the clothes she wears. Sometimes the things she wears are a bit too skimpy.

Sharon: Right, what do you mean by that?

Suzie: Short and a bit too . . . erm . . .

Sharon: You wouldn't go out in it?

Suzie: Yeah [giggles].

There is recognition here that the lives of pop stars are somewhat out of the ordinary and that this in turn shapes their choice of attire. For girls especially, the styling of female pop stars raises further questions about modesty and respectability in their everyday lives. In this respect, Saima, an 11-year-old Muslim girl from a Midlands city condemned a number of female pop stars for their inappropriate dress sense, implying that they set a bad example to other females:

Sharon: What else have we got? Right, Kylie. We've mentioned Kylie a few times haven't we? Right, she's wanted for her poor fashion sense. So what have we got?

Saima: OK. I don't think like that her clothes are appropriate to wear because they are too short and she only wears like strips to cover herself and that's like too short so like I don't even see why she has to wear clothes.

Sharon: Yeah, you mean she might as well just go around with nothing on?

Saima: Yeah.

Sharon: OK, so the theme of showing too much flesh and wearing things which are inappropriately short is the strongest thing you dislike.

Saima: Yeah. These are like examples of these. That's Jennifer Lopez with all her legs and her belly . . . her shorts, they look like they've shrunk.

Saima's concerns tap into a larger pool of data on this issue collected from focus groups with parents and from home visits with parents and children – namely fears surrounding the inappropriate display of the female body by children as encouraged through exposure to the imagery of pop stars and the popularity of *Pop Idol* culture.

The pervasiveness of pop stars as individuals children single out to physically copy was brought home to us in a focus group held in a remote rural village in the north-east of England. The village had no clothes shops at all and only a limited selection of clothing retailers in nearby towns. This lack of direct exposure to the ever-expanding array of children's fashions, not to mention the numerous advertising and marketing campaigns encountered during the average shopping trip in a city or mall, nor indeed exposure to the fashions of other shoppers, did not deter children from the village from appropriating the clothes they had to try and mimic the images of pop stars. As one mother, Janet, said of her 9-year-old daughter:

Yeah, the pop stars, my daughter does dress up in an evening in things that she's got from a charity shop. She's got some 5-inch heels, a tight skirt like that, a top that shows her middle and she has her hair loose, she puts make up on, she dances and with being quite plump she looks a real little tart. Absolutely, it's frightening to look at.

This mother's concerns that her daughter was too 'plump' to be flattered by such revealing clothing also brings to light the reality that many female pop stars certainly subscribe to the cult of slenderness, and that there may be a corresponding danger in young girls holding such people up as idols or ideals. Speaking in a different focus group, another mother recalled having to explain to her daughter that girl groups who wore combat trousers were 'so slim' and that in real life such styles tend not to fit well and look nice on children's bodies.

And yet pop stars are only one half of the story. The other half concerns sports stars, an interrelated part of popular commercial culture by all means given the overlapping spheres of mass communication, marketization and the production of celebrity. Sports stars appear to serve two functions in relation to children's fashion consumption. One, in similar vein to that of pop stars, is that of being imitated. This was very apparent in the results of a photographic project conducted with children in which they were asked to take photos of their favourite clothes. While some clothes were depicted on their own (e.g. laid out on the carpet, hanging off a wardrobe door, on a rail in a shop), some children chose to 'model' them for us with a parent behind the lens. Robert, aged 8 from a shire town, did this very thing for all of his photos (bar one) and consequently, when discussing his photos with me, he was clearly pleased to see he had successfully copied both the look and the poses of his idol David Beckham:

Robert: Look, I actually look like David Beckham there.

Sharon: Yeah.

Robert: I've got those lines up my hair.

Sharon: Right. Here we go, here's another footballing pose. Are you just kicking the ball there now?

Robert: Yeah and it's Real Madrid.

Sharon: Oh is that Real Madrid's kit?

Robert: Yeah and it's got Beckham on the back. That's a Manchester United away kit.

Sharon: This is their away kit right. OK. And have you just scored there as well?

Robert: Yeah, and I really like that top.

There is indeed scope here to tie this data in with pre-existing theoretical approaches to (adult) consumption which emphasize its more hedonistic/mentalistic dimensions (such as Campbell, 1987). For example, we see here how Robert has capacity to 'imagine' an idealized version of himself, that he then went on to create through material consumption. This line of argument clearly meshes well with the early example of Suzie imagining how she would 'dress up' to gain pleasure from realizing and embodying her imagined ideal self (i.e. as pop star Avril Lavigne), proving consumption to be an enabling and transformatory force which mutually reinforces both its mentalistic and materialistic dimensions.

Alongside physical imitation is the issue of how the ownership and display of sports branded goods connects with the processes of childhood social inclusion/exclusion. As Elliott and Leonard (2004) have argued in relation to labelled trainers, sports branding offers children a fairly easy and obvious way of fitting in with their peers and acting as a good indicator of familial wealth. Examples of peer pressure regarding the ownership of sports brands also cropped up on several occasions in our study, regardless of the children's geographical context and proximity to either 'famous' football clubs or leading sportswear retailers. William, for example, aged 10 from a remote rural village in the north-east of England, told me that, 'all my friends have England kits and I really do want one', while the mother of a 6-year-old boy from a Midlands city said the interest of her sons' friends in football-related clothing lines was beginning to shape his own fashion sense – 'I suppose he doesn't want to feel left out does he?', she reasoned.

Here we can observe a slight difference to the influences pop stars appeared to have on our tweens – that is, while pop star emulation was certainly about image and style it was not explicitly connected to branding or logo culture. The emulation of sports stars or the construction of a 'sporty' image, however, is a different matter altogether with 'the brand' offering a symbolic connection between consumer and promoter.

In particular, Nike seems to have succeeded in saturating the sportswear market and being *the* label that children wish to be seen in.⁴ Joseph (who at 14 is one of the older boys on the project) reaffirmed the market significance of the brand – 'Nike do everything', he stated, 'there's hardly anything you can't find in Nike.' He then went on to summarize the essence of what 'Nike style' entailed – 'a laid-back kind of smooth style of T-shirt instead of like really tight and going after a certain aspect of something. So it's like really baggy and laid-back which is what I like.'

For Joseph, this 'Nike style' was put to use in order to encourage others to gaze upon, envy and copy his look – encouraging in his peers a type of conspicuous consumption of himself. His comments reveal a self-reflexive sense of pride and achievement of constructing a stylish appearance:

Jane: So what do you mean by looking flashy?

Joseph: You've got good style clothes and you know shiny like this . . . looks cool. . . . I've got an outfit upstairs which is . . . I call it flasher. I'll show you that if you want.

Jane: Yeah.

Joseph: Yeah, like that. People when you're walking about the street they'd look at you and go 'Oh look at that'. . . . When I was wearing that coat yesterday, everyone was doing that. So that was a good vibe.

Here the brand is being used to influence the teenager's perceived popularity and to wrap (literally) a protective veil over his physical body that deflects attention to the political commodity of the sign (in this case the well-known 'tick').

Sporting the 'Nike style' may well be transformatory for children, but for parents it is part and parcel of a worrying dependence of children on label culture for social acceptance. Several mothers at a focus group held in a Midlands city seemed powerless and defeated in the face of their children's inflexible demands:

Katy: Mine won't come shopping with me. They say 'Just get me Nike', that's all they'll say . . . they are not bothered what I bring back as long as it's got a Nike tick on it. I don't think they'd be bothered if they were really horrible trainers as long as there was a Nike tick on it.

Daphne: Yes, if you buy them cheap ones they won't wear them. And not only have they got to be Nike, they've got to be the latest Nike or the latest Adidas, or whatever it is. They've got to be like up top with fashion.

We can see that wanting 'just Nike', and indeed, only the most up-to-date versions of Nike, brings with it an issue of parent-child disconnection in the consumption process as children simply 'know' what they want and thus can opt out of the sociality of the shopping experience. The economic implications of relying too exclusively on branded goods to fill a wardrobe should not be overlooked either.

In another focus group, held in a small town, label culture became demonized as a type of a dangerous contagion waiting to take hold of children's minds and bodies – something that must be fought against by parents for both moral and economic reasons: 'we're trying to sort of allay it a bit, but it's started', one mother told us, another warning her that 'once one of your children's got it, you pass it down and it gets earlier and earlier'. Parents went on to blame the global capitalized economy for being the source of such pressures to consume, given the accelerated market cycle of new fashions (or newer versions of old favourites) – part and parcel of a more broader strategic encroachment of commercial culture which has now become a constituent of childhood development.

Concluding remarks

Via an examination of children's investments in sports stars and pop stars as commercial cultural icons, this commentary has begun to chart the ways in which popular culture can shape childhood identities. Taking fashion and the consumption of style as a focal point, we have seen how children become exposed to the imagery of such 'celebrities' and how this leads to processes of imitation, idealization and identification with or dissociation from a fashion typology or brand name. As with other consumer groups, fashion consumption among children certainly ties in with the process of lifestyle consumption and its expression through the body. While we may question whether the term 'lifestyle' has any real theoretical currency in relation to children, given that their bodies, likes/dislikes, hobbies, close group of friends and so on are in a constant state of development, the 'style of life' for children growing up in today's highly commodified and

media-saturated society is one that has an affinity with the aspirational and conspicuous construction of consumer-based lifestyles in the adult world.

As we have seen, children are indeed complex consumers. Not only are they 'media savvy' in their ability to critically evaluate the cultural images that bombard them, but they are also skilled at interpreting modes of fashion and what this can communicate about one's personality. They are also proficient in stylizing their own lives through cultivating a particular 'look'. This is not to imply, however, that children can freely put on and take off 'images' at will, but that adults as 'guardians and gatekeepers' (Martens et al., 2004) of children's consumption must negotiate the same set of commercial and cultural persuasions about the opportunities to consume.

Through investing in cultural icons such as pop stars and sports stars, children are not engaging in a consumer culture devoid of magic, transformations, dreaming and escape. In fact, these very elements make up part of what has been termed 'sacralized' childhood (Langer, 2004). This version of childhood, centred not just around ideas of innocence but equally on safe play, controlled adventure, imagination and enchantment becomes constituted through the market as children enjoy the hedonistic pleasures of 'becoming' one of their idols (albeit fleetingly). Consumption, then, helps to humanize and make intimate the bond between child and celebrity, regardless of age, time and place. Their appeal may be commercially manipulated, but the ability of pop stars and sports stars to connect with the imaginations of children ensures market after market for global consumer capitalism.

Notes

1. The commentary draws on data from a research project entitled 'New Consumers? Children, Fashion and Consumption' conducted with colleagues Dr Christopher Pole, Dr Jane Pilcher, Dr Tim Edwards at the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester and funded under the ESRC/AHRB Cultures of Consumption research programme. See Boden (2004) for an overview of the research project.

2. Our ethnographic work involved home visits with eight families spread across England. Each family had a least one child between the ages of 6 and 11. Activities undertaken with the children included semi-structured interviews; fashion 'likes' and 'dislikes' projects, in which they had the opportunity to write, draw and stick pictures in; a photographic project where children were given a disposable camera to record images of clothes; and accompanied shopping trips. Parents also participated in interviews and completed clothing diaries.

3. Other sports stars to court wider commercial appeal include Michael Jordan, Denis Rodman, Anna Kornikova, Michael Owen and Tiger Woods.

4. Elliott and Leonard (2004) also found this to be the case.

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