

AN EXPLORATION OF FASHION INFORMATION
FLOW BETWEEN MOTHERS AND
THEIR CHILDREN

by

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ABSTRACT

There is a new phenomenon in the fashion industry and the direction of trend information flow. Where children's apparel used to be influenced by adult apparel, there is an apparent change—children's apparel is beginning to have an influence on adult apparel. This study examines the phenomenon through the theories of fashion trend information flow and consumer socialization theory. It also examines the background of children's apparel as a basis for the phenomenon that is beginning to occur.

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INTRODUCTION

Children's apparel makes up a significant portion of the apparel industry in the United States and growth over the next five years is expected to be healthy. Children's retailers are currently very successful, with a subtle trend that shows children's apparel companies are expanding into the adult market as a viable growth strategy. The children's apparel market, applied to children ages 9 and younger, targets about 42.6 million children ("Number of children," 2014).

The consumption of children's clothing may impact the adult apparel market in other ways as well. In looking at theories in the diffusion of fashion trends, there is support that shows that adult clothing influences trends in children's apparel. Social changes in today's society might be creating a reverse pattern of this historical diffusion of fashion trends. In other words, trends in the children's market are having an influence on adult apparel.

Finally, research in consumer socialization has focused on parents influencing their children in consumption patterns. The idea of children as consumer socialization agents for adults has not been extensively researched. A better understanding of this phenomenon may impact the understanding of consumption of children's and adult apparel.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between children's apparel and adult apparel at both the industry and consumer level. First, a historical perspective of children's apparel is followed by an industry overview. Finally, two theories—diffusion and adoption of innovations and consumer socialization—provide a

conceptual perspective for understanding the influence of children on adult consumer behavior for fashion apparel.

CHILDREN'S APPAREL: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013) defines a child as “a young person especially between infancy and youth.” This definition provides insight into the targeted age range, but it is not specific enough. In this research, the term “children” will refer to those between the ages of five and ten as laid out by Gesell & Ilg (1977). This is the age when children are no longer infants, but do not yet have the independence of a teenager. They are now comfortable in their surroundings and exhibit more independence than before. They are capable of understanding complex concepts. They are self-sufficient to an extent in that they are not old enough to have complete independence from their parents, but can complete many tasks that were previously done by their parents. This stage of life is crucial to the development of a child. It is when children are shaped from infants to adults (Gesell & Ilg, 1977). The next stage of childhood development is known as a “tween.” A child’s “tween” years are defined as the years between ten and thirteen. This is when a person is not as independent as a teenager, but is able to complete more tasks as an adult’s equal than before.

Adult interaction with children has evolved over time. In Medieval times, parents treated their children as miniature adults. As soon as they were capable of walking, they took on the same amount of responsibility as adults. This was because a great amount of labor was required in order to maintain the family life (Cook, 2004). Young boys wore the same clothing as girls until they were about six or seven years old. At this age, they

participated in a ceremony called breeching. This was an event in which the young boy was presented with a bifurcated garment similar to what the men wore, called breeches (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). This served as a symbol of a boy's entrance into the adult world. It was not until Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote *Emile* in the 18th century that society's view of childhood changed from miniature adults who were given much responsibility to innocent beings who should be allowed to jump, play, and be creative.

Rousseau proposed that children are innocent (Cook, 2004). He wrote that children should make their own mistakes in order to learn. He thought it was best for children to use their own senses to learn about the world (Rousseau, 2003). A result of Rousseau's theory was increased freedom for children. Though it was nowhere near the freedom given to children today, it was a dramatic shift at the time. This theory altered children's apparel dramatically. Where children's clothes used to imitate adults', they began to include elements specific to children. Girls were given loose-fitting muslin dresses to wear and boys wore skeleton suits. Skeleton suits were composed of long trousers, a white shirt, and a jacket worn over the shirt that was a shorter version of the men's jackets of the time. The new styles of boys' and girls' garments allowed for more movement and freedom than ever before (Tortora & Eubank, 2010).

The Romantic Period directly followed this change in children's clothing. It is classified as the years between 1820 and 1850 (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). During the Romantic Period, women's clothing was very restrictive. Dresses were worn low on the shoulder which did not allow for much movement of the woman's arms. Girls wore this same silhouette with a shorter hemline than the adult version (Tortora & Eubank, 2010).

Boys were given much more freedom. They had open-necked shirts which were less restrictive than their fathers' garments (Rose, 1989).

Fashion designs for men, women, and children changed rapidly and dramatically in the 20th century. There was a shift in the children's market from fashion-based apparel that mainly focused on trends to practical apparel that was more basic. After 1920, children were given clothes designed specifically for play (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). The early 20th century brought a major change in the retail industry. First, baby products were promoted in stores during a special event called Baby Week. Then, George Earnshaw, a publisher of retailing information for children's apparel, suggested that retail stores include a section dedicated to infants' merchandise. During this same time period, women became the purchasing agents of their household when their husbands went to work. Infants' departments were established in order to make shopping easier for the mother (Cook, 2004). The addition of an infant's department in a department store signified a new product category: children's apparel. Children began to truly be differentiated from adults. As companies' awareness of the child's purchasing power grew, they catered to children when developing marketing and selling strategies (Cook, 2004). The infants' section grew to include a children's section. This moment in history marks the point when society viewed children as independent beings.

Today, children follow similar trends as adults. They wear bright colors and prints. Regulations are in place for children's apparel in order to protect them from danger, such as fires. Children's clothing is more unisex in nature, meaning the differences between boys' and girls' apparel is mostly unnoticeable. Fashion designers

adopted the popularity of children's apparel by producing their own children's lines. These products tend to mirror the apparel trends seen in the adult apparel marketplace (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). These changes over time have contributed to the growth of the industry engaged in the production and marketing of children's apparel.

CHILDREN'S APPAREL: AN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Customers in the children's apparel market are shopping for children between the ages of birth and about 9 years of age. Clothing purchases include formalwear, casual wear, athletic apparel, and sleepwear. Purchases are not made by the end user, i.e., the child, but generally by the parents of the children for whom they are shopping. Customers also include grandparents. With the introduction of a major portion of Generation Y into the children's apparel customers, there will be more demand for high-quality brand name goods. This is due to the fact that these mothers waited to have children in order to build careers, so they will have a larger amount of discretionary income (Panteva, 2013).

The children's apparel market applies to children who are ages 9 and younger. In 2013, this number was estimated to be 42.6 million. By 2018, this number is expected to grow 0.6% ("Number of children," 2014). The number of children born between the years of 2008 and 2009 decreased significantly due to the economic recession but has steadily returned to pre-recession rates.

During the recession in 2008 and 2009, the children's apparel market experienced struggle. In order to maintain stability, many large corporations acquired smaller corporations, resulting in greater saturation of the market (Panteva, 2013). While the industry was greatly affected by the recession, many consumers continued to make

purchases simply out of necessity during this time. For this reason, the market did not suffer as greatly as other markets.

The industry grew 1.1% between the years of 2008-2013 and is projected to grow 2.9% through 2018 (Panteva, 2013). Revenue reached \$10.5 billion in 2013. The recession in 2008 affected the children's market negatively due to a major decrease in discretionary spending. However, following these years, the market experienced growth (Panteva, 2013).

Children's apparel is sold in both retail stores and department stores. While clothing retailers typically focus on a single product category, department stores carry various product categories. The two store types present major competition to each other. Within the children's retail industry, companies are separated by price point (Panteva, 2013). This establishes a brand image for the consumer and is highly important when building brand loyalty.

Customers tend to remain loyal to brand names such as Gymboree (Panteva, 2013). This is due to the fact that many companies place an emphasis on customer service, ensuring that consumers receive assistance from sales associates while they are shopping in the retail environment (Panteva, 2013).

Panteva (2013) named a few factors that contribute to successful operation in the children's apparel industry. Businesses must have adequate ability to maintain their stock. Brand names are highly important in this industry and must be a focus for any successful company. Goods must be displayed appropriately in a way that attracts the target

consumer. Due to the emphasis on customer service, employees should be skilled in their knowledge of the company and its product.

In order to enter the market, a company must be aware of the major players and their concentration in the market. This includes Toys 'R' Us, The Children's Place, Carter's, and the Gymboree Corporation (Panteva, 2013). They offer products at competitive prices that may be difficult to achieve as a new business. An entering business must also have the ability to establish a brand image. It will need to be able to compete not only with the children's retail industry, but also department stores and e-commerce (Panteva, 2013).

Several children's companies are experiencing success in establishing women's apparel and accessory lines. For example, Pink Chicken is a boutique that sells whimsical children's and women's apparel. It was founded by Stacy Fraser as a boutique that sold only children's apparel. Fraser was continually asked by mothers to produce a line for women. She introduced a women's collection to her stores in January 2013 due to her women's apparel items achieving great success (Gootman, 2012).

Another example is Ryan Roche. She founded the company of her namesake in 2004 after having children and realizing that there was not a place in the market for organic products with a sustainable edge. Her style is sleek and minimal with a hint of whimsy (Betker, 2012). Her company is based on an ecofriendly focus. One of her main fans is Maggie Gyllenhaal. Gyllenhaal influenced Roche to design clothes for women after Roche designed a garment for her daughter (Zalopany, 2011). Roche's women's line has had great success alongside her children's apparel line.

Finally, Petunia Pickle Bottom began as a diaper bag producer that sold to retailers. The idea was to provide mothers with fashionable accessories that had previously focused solely on function. The first few years of the company involved great struggle. The owners had to hold various jobs and live with friends or parents just to keep their lives afloat (Crawford, 2010). Because of the product category (infant accessories), Petunia Pickle Bottom was able to stay in business and keep other companies in business during the recession. They observed that customers continue to buy product for children even during a moment of economic downturn. The owners place a large focus on customer requests. They stay up-to-date on their various social media accounts and ensure that their customers' needs are being filled. The company has a laid-back environment that attracts employees to stay on for multiple years. Their brand image is related to promoting fashionable accessories to mothers. Petunia Pickle Bottom updates its look every six months in order to stay ahead of the competition. With the rise in popularity of the diaper bag category, they have more competition than ever before. Because of this, they must remain innovative and focused. Couple Denai and Braden Jones, along with longtime friend Korie Conant, began Petunia Pickle Bottom together as a result of a desire to start a business that focused on artistic inspiration (Crawford, 2010).

This background on the children's apparel industry provides insight into the changes that are occurring in trend information. It shows the perspective of retailers as they view this new trend. In order to complete the study, it is important to view the

consumer's point of view, as discussed in the theories of diffusion and adoption and consumer socialization theory.

These companies represent what could be the entrance of a possible growth strategy for companies within the children's apparel industry. Companies can apply this to their strategies in order to reach busy parents and help serve the adult consumer of apparel.

Where previous discussion focused on the relationship of the children's apparel industry and the adult apparel industry, the next section provides an overview of theoretical framework that supports the changing apparel consumption patterns among children and their parents. These theories are presented to explain how changes in style and design in children's apparel influence the implementation in adult apparel.

CHILDREN'S APPAREL: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

There are two major theories that pertain to the idea being discussed. The first, as explained below, is the theory of diffusion and adoption. This is the idea that consumers adopt an innovation and cause it to gain acceptance, or diffuse. Within this section, theories of trend information flow will be discussed. The second theory is consumer socialization theory. This pertains to the idea of consumption behavioral learning. Within this section, reverse socialization will be examined.

Diffusion and Adoption

The concept of diffusion is the process of an innovation gaining acceptance. Adoption is the implementation of that innovation (Rogers, 1983). An innovation, in our case, is an object that is perceived as new (Brannon, 2010). The components to the

diffusion of an innovation are as follows. The innovation is introduced into the marketplace. It is then communicated across various channels. Communication, or the way in which people translate information between each other, is crucial because an innovation is unlikely to be observed if it is not communicated. Time is also a necessary component, as an innovation will not be diffused immediately. Finally, the social system must accept it. A social system is a group of people who have a similar culture. It could be a neighborhood, an honor society, or a family unit. The culture must have general acceptance in order for diffusion to take place (Rogers, 1983).

An important part of the diffusion process is adoption. When a consumer considers the adoption of an innovation, the following steps are taken:

1. Knowledge, or awareness of the innovation is brought to the consumer.
2. Persuasion takes place to form the consumer's opinion.
3. A decision is made to either make use of the innovation or to reject it. This step concludes the mental process.
4. The consumer physically implements the innovation.
5. The consumer seeks confirmation that the decision of implementation was correct.

This leads to either continuance or discontinuance of the innovation, meaning the adopter will either continue to use the innovation or not (Rogers, 1983).

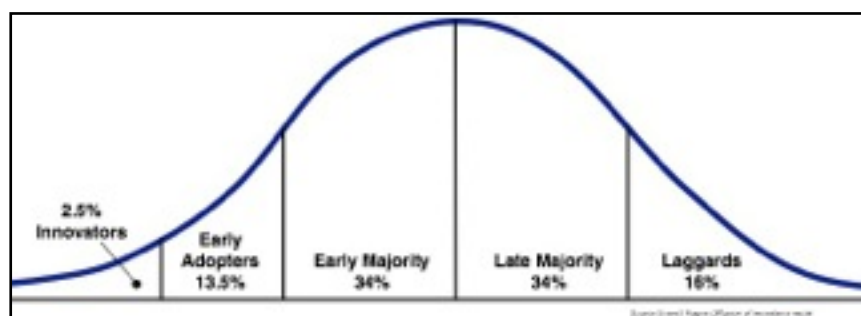
The characteristics of an innovation influence the success of its diffusion. Rogers (1983) names five major characteristics that influence an innovation's adoption:

1. An innovation will have relative advantage in the market. This means that it is viewed as superior to previous innovations.

2. Compatibility relates to the innovation's ease in which it fits in the adopter's lifestyle.
3. The innovation's complexity indicates the difficulty of use.
4. Trial-ability is the ability to test the innovation prior to adoption and implementation.
5. Observability is the innovation's presence to the public eye.

Fashion Cycles

Acceptance Curve



SOURCE: Rogers (1962)

Fashion is a style that is accepted by a group of people during a given time. Fashion is cyclical, meaning that trends often reappear at different time periods. Each trend follows the acceptance curve. The acceptance curve shown in the figure above presents the following process: acceptance begins with Innovators, increases with Early Adopters, reaches its height with the Majority, and then is finally depleted by the Laggards. In the fashion industry, the Innovators are the fashion leaders (Brannon, 2010), or people who set trends. They serve as the leaders of the direction of fashion trends. Other consumers watch to see what the fashion leaders wear (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). They pay close attention to runway reports and trend information. At this stage in a fashion cycle, supply is limited for the specific product. The product is often more

expensive (Atkinson & Easey, 2009) because the majority of consumers are not yet interested in it.

The next stage in the acceptance curve is Early Adopters, or the individuals to watch as role models for innovations. At this stage, competition increases between retailers (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). The trend gains exposure and sales increase (Atkinson & Easey, 2009). Early Adopters tend to be the influencers of the masses (Rogers, 1962). The price of the product is still higher than what the average person would pay, but it offers the fashion value that Early Adopters look for.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the diffusion of a trend reaches its peak with the Majority, who make up 68% of adopters in the acceptance curve. Most consumers fall in this category. They do not follow fashion trends closely and will not pay a high price for a high-fashion product. Prices fall at this stage to meet consumer needs (Atkinson & Easey, 2009).

The final step of the diffusion curve is adoption by the Laggards. Sales rapidly decrease (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). Prices must be cut dramatically in order to sell the remainder of the product. These consumers are more focused on price than style. Often, product in this stage is going out of fashion. Retailers must clear their space of this product before it is out of style in order to make room for new merchandise and to maintain profit margins.

Traditionally, the adult apparel market has been the source of innovation for the children's apparel market. Trends within adult apparel would eventually appear in the designs of children's apparel. The time between the trends' appearance in adult apparel

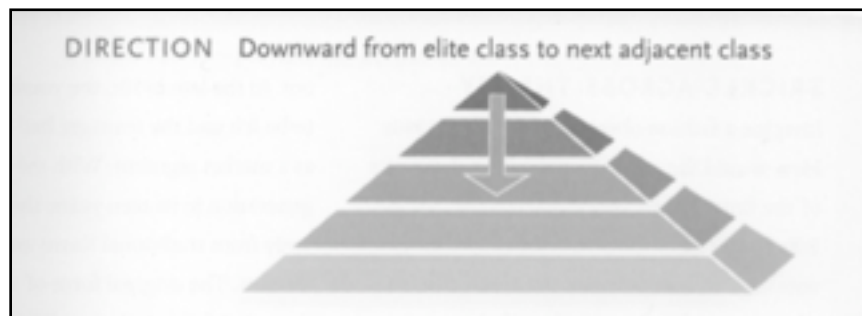
and the diffusion into the children's apparel market is growing increasingly shorter. Furthermore, there is evidence within the style and design innovations in children's apparel that seem to influence the adult apparel market.

Theorists have used sociological theories to explain the diffusion of fashion information through groups of people. A discussion of each of these theories follows. The trickle-up theory in particular is relevant in understanding the shift in trend information and fashion diffusion between adults and children.

Trickle-Down Theory

Trickle-down theory proposes that trends flow from the elite class downward through various social classes. It was originally proposed by two separate people: Veblen (2007) and Simmel. Simmel's theory is that the upper class differentiates themselves by

Trickle-Down Pyramid



SOURCE: Brannon (2010)

adopting new trends. When the lower classes imitate the elite, the elite move on to adopt a different trend in order to remain of a higher status (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). Veblen (2007) writes that the upper class adopts trends in order to show excess of consumption. Their status is shown in the amount of wastefulness they have in their lifestyle. The upper class sets the trends for lower classes (Veblen, 2007). A third theorist, McCracken (1985),

modified the two previous theories by Veblen (2007) and Simmel (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). His addition is called the “chase and flight pattern.” Instead of the upper class influencing lower classes, he proposes that the movement is upward from the lower class. That is to say, lower classes “chase” the style of the upper class while the upper class “takes flight” to avoid association with the lower class (McCracken, 1985).

Trickle-down theory involves a large focus on the elite and the power they hold over society. Today, the elite class is made up of consumers who can afford to purchase innovative styles and materials (Medvedev, 2005). In trickle-down theory, wealthy consumers serve as the Innovators of trends. As defined previously, Innovators are the people who start trends. They are the fashion-conscious. As shown in the figure above, the trend begins with the upper class. Early Adopters are the class below, followed by the Majority and then Laggards.

Trickle-down theory was proposed in 1899. Since then, the views of society changed. It is difficult to identify the elite due to an addition of many layers in the social system (Brannon, 2010). It is much easier to appear wealthy today than it was a century ago. For these reasons, trickle-down theory is not as prevalent as it was decades ago.

Trickle-Across Theory

In trickle-across theory, trend information travels across social classes rather than from one class to another. This is common today due to mass communication (Brannon,

2010). All classes have access to similar information. A fashion-conscious consumer in

Trickle-Across Pyramid



SOURCE: Brannon (2010)

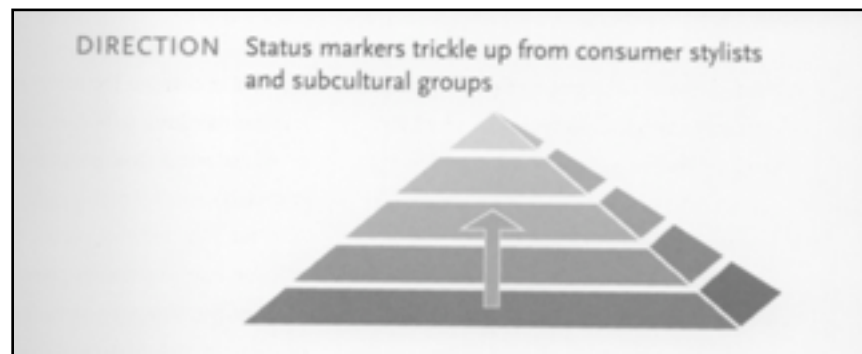
the lower class can have the same access to fashion trends as a fashion-conscious consumer in the upper class. In this theory, fashion followers, or those who adopt after the highest point in the acceptance curve, look to fashion leaders, or opinion leaders (Brannon, 2010), within their own social class (Kim, Fiore, & Kim, 2011). As shown in the figure above, each of the stages of the fashion cycle take place within each social class. The Innovators begin the trend, then Early Adopters accept the trend. As the trend moves through the cycle, the Majority within the social class accepts the trend. Interest depletes when the Laggards accept the trend within their social class.

Today, with the rise of fast fashion, the industry produces enough product to accommodate the fashion needs of consumers of various social classes (Medvedev, 2005). This is one of the reasons why trickle-across theory is applicable to the retail industry. Various price points can produce goods at various stages of the fashion cycle, appealing to all consumers within each price point.

Trickle-Up Theory

Trickle-up theory states that influence comes from the lower classes and moves up through the social strata. Field (1970) proposed trickle-up theory as he observed upper classes imitating the fashions of lower classes. He believed that this theory began historically during the French Revolution of 1789 (Field, 1970), when it was dangerous to display wealth. The French upper class disguised themselves by dressing like the lower class in order to survive. Since that time, the imitation of the lower class does not have as

Trickle-Up Pyramid



SOURCE: Brannon (2010)

negative a connotation.

With trickle-up theory, as opposed to trickle-down, trends do not originate in the minds of top clothing designers. Instead, designers take inspiration from the streets (Polhemus, 1994). They explore alternative fashion neighborhoods where people experiment with styles and fabrics (Brannon, 2010). The first designer to display trickle-up influence was Yves Saint Laurent in the 1960s (Betts, 1994).

As shown in the figure above, the Innovators appear at the bottom of the pyramid. Early Adopters in the next highest class catch on to the trend and adopt it. The trend continues to move until Laggards appear at the very top. However, there is an exception

to the fashion cycle with this theory. As the top of the pyramid represents the elite and high-fashion designers, the display of their acceptance would not appear as a Laggard, rather the popularity of the current trend.

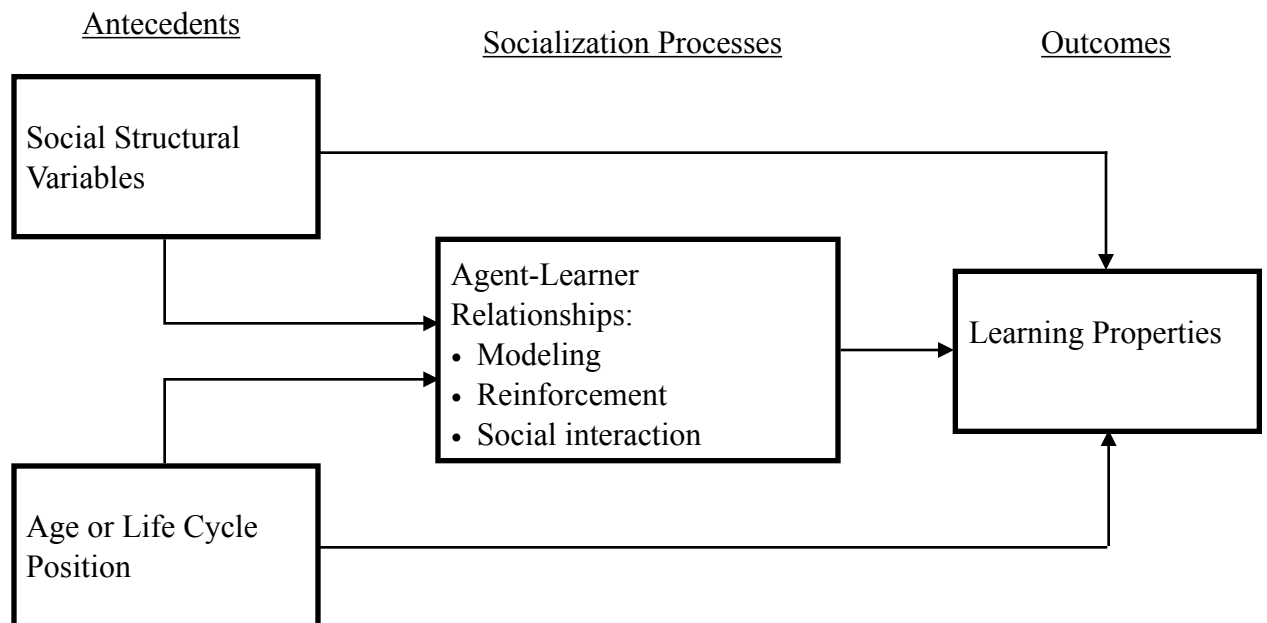
The trickle-up theory applies to the phenomenon that is being examined if the elite class is replaced with parents and the lower class is replaced with children. The exchange of variables can be explained by the traditional view of trickle-down theory and that trend information flows from the top downward. In trickle-up theory, trend information diffuses upward. This is applied when fashion trend information flows up from child to parent where the traditional movement was downward.

Consumer Socialization Theory

Another theory that can be applied to the shifting patterns of influence among parents and children is Consumer Socialization Theory. Socialization is defined as the process by which a person learns certain behaviors. Consumer socialization is the process by which a person learns consumption behaviors. Moschis and Moore (1979) developed a theory called the conceptual model of consumer socialization, which shows that five factors influence consumer socialization: socialization agents, learning processes, social structural variables, age or life cycle, and content of learning. Socialization agents are people or organizations that influence consumer learning of acceptable consumption patterns. Learning processes are the various ways a consumer builds their consumer behavior. These processes are separated into three categories. One, modeling, is when the learner imitates the socialization agent. The second, reinforcement, requires either a reward for good behavior or a punishment for bad behavior. The third category is social

interaction, which could include a combination of modeling and reinforcement. Social structural variables are factors that establish the consumer's environment where learning takes place. Age or life cycle is when a person's learning occurs. Learning properties are the various behaviors that a consumer builds during consumer socialization. The relationship between these variables is shown in the figure below. This figure shows that social structural variables and age or life cycle precede the socialization process. The learning process takes place simultaneously to the socialization process. Learning properties are the outcome of this socialization process.

A Conceptual Model of Consumer Socialization



SOURCE: MOCHIS AND MOORE (1979)

Family Influence

Families place a large amount of influence on consumer socialization. Moschis (1985) conducted a study to determine the role of family communication in consumer

socialization. Family communication is the process of communication between parent and child. These processes include the communication of norms and expectations, reinforcement mechanisms, and the social interaction mechanism. The social interaction mechanism often involves both modeling and reinforcement.

There are some specific influences on consumer socialization by family communication. These can be direct or indirect. Direct influences are content of learning, communication processes, and the structures and patterns of communication. The content of learning involves the parent's consumer behavior and how it is communicated to the child. For example, children learn price-quality relationships from their parents (Moschis, 1985). Communication processes involve reinforcement and transfer of knowledge. A study found that there are five main methods that are used to teach consumer behavior. These include disallowing certain behavior, speaking directly about consumption behaviors, having a discussion about consumption, modeling, and letting the child discover appropriate behavior on his or her own (Moschis, 1985). Moschis (1985) defines two types of structures of family communication: socio-oriented family communication and concept-oriented family communication. Socio-oriented family communication aims to encourage submission and respect while also establishing positive social relationships within the family. Concept-oriented family communication focuses on guidelines that allow the child to form his or her own opinions by him- or herself. These two types of structures impact a child differently, but both have a direct influence on consumer socialization. Indirect influences on consumer socialization are less defined but just as impactful. Moschis (1985) mentions social comparison theory, which states that children

must compare their parents' view of consumption with others' views of consumption in order to determine their individual views. In this way, children can use their knowledge learned from within their own family and compare it with outside information.

Reverse Socialization

Reverse socialization is defined as the child's influence over parents' consumption behaviors (Ekström, 2007). This phenomenon has not been as widely studied as consumer socialization described above. Ekström (2007) conducted a study in which parents and children were interviewed to view the socialization effects on parents. The study found that children play a role in the continuing consumer socialization of their parents. There is a term called "retroactive socialization" that means that a child learns consumer behavior from a source outside of the family (i.e., peers) and then relays this information to his or her parents, thus influencing them. Ekström (2007) found that parents are highly influenced in the area of fashion. Children often inform their parents of fashion trends. A mother that was interviewed said that she has her children's opinion in mind when she shops for her own clothes. Parents are also influenced by the clothes their children wear. This study shows that just as parents influence the socialization of their children, children do the same toward them.

CONCLUSION

It seems to be apparent that there is a shift in the way fashion change is trending. Through the examples of Petunia Pickle Bottom, Pink Chicken, and Ryan Roche, there is a change in the manner in which women receive their fashion information. They see trends in their children's clothing and use this as influence in their own style. This

phenomenon can be linked to reverse socialization in that women are learning from their children rather than the original thought of consumer socialization (Ekström, 2007). It has been theorized that this change was a result of the Great Recession of 2008. Families had to make important decisions on how their money was spent, and because children constantly need new clothing, families' discretionary income was spent on this product category. Thus, mothers began to use their children's clothing as a source of fashion trend information (Crawford, 2010).

This phenomenon can also be linked to trickle-up theory. Trickle-up theory proposes that trend information flows from a lower economic class to a higher economic class (Field, 1970). In this same vein, trend information flows from child to mother, where the child is the lower class and the mother is the higher class. Past studies have shown that in trickle-up theory, the elite class's style imitates that of the lower class. The trend that is seen today is similar in that women's apparel imitates the style of children's apparel.

There is no definitive answer to the issue proposed in this study. However, through the theories presented and the examples given, it appears that the phenomenon is occurring. Women's apparel is influenced by children's apparel now more than ever.

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