

Talking Fashion in Female Friendship Groups: Negotiating the Necessary Marketplace Skills and Knowledge

Cagri Yalkin · Richard Rosenbaum-Elliott

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Abstract This study revisits contexts of consumer socialization by focusing on fashion consumption among female teenagers. Focus groups and interviews have been utilized to collect data from 12- to 16-year-old female adolescents. The findings indicate that the adolescents cultivate both rational and symbolic skills within their friendship groups through friendship talk. The paper contributes to consumer socialization studies by examining the role of social relationships in and the accounts of the actual uses of fashion products. By doing so, it extends scholars', policy makers', schools', and families' understanding of the dynamics involved in the building of young people's consumer identities and what type of issues they face as young consumers. Thus, the study provides policy makers with information regarding how consumer skills and knowledge are cultivated and the role of the friendship group in cultivating them, which can be used in formulating future policy aimed at consumer education, literacy programmes and social marketing aimed at adolescents.

Keywords Consumer socialization · Female teenagers · Fashion

Introduction

As citizens of the marketplace, young consumers are constantly surrounded by advertisements, brands, and symbols. Young consumers now spend more of their time at shopping than at playing (Schor 2004). As their relationship with brands and shopping starts early on and they take on consumer identities at an increasingly young age, young consumers' formation of consumer identities are of interest to policy makers, parents, educators, and to the adolescents themselves alike.

In line with discussions about destructive economic development (United Nations Sustainable Knowledge Development Platform 2012), there is a growing body of literature that deals with dark side of consumption issues such as overconsumption and sustainable consumption

C. Yalkin (✉)

Faculty of Communications, Kadir Has University, Kadir Has Caddesi, Cibali, Fatih, Istanbul, Turkey 34083

e-mail: cagri.yalkin@khas.edu.tr

R. Rosenbaum-Elliott

School of Management, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

e-mail: R.Elliott@bath.ac.uk

(e.g., Connolly and Prothero 2003; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997). Kjellberg (2008, p.152) notes “it is difficult to deny that the continued spread of consumerist/materialist market society has been mobilized as one central component of this (economic) development.” In parallel with these, consumers are given important roles and responsibilities towards sustainable development (e.g., Autio et al. 2009; Markkula and Moisander 2012). Other dark side of consumption issues such as over-eating, compulsive consumption, impulsive consumption, and terminal materialism are the products of consumption culture and current mode of economic development (see Schor and Holt 2000 for a comprehensive review). “Compulsive buyers amass unmanageable amounts of debt can create economic and emotional problems for themselves and their families” (Faber and O’Guinn 1988, p.147). Similarly, impulsive buying specifically has been linked to post-purchase financial problems, product disappointment, guilt feelings, and social disapproval (Rook and Fisher 1995, p.306). Thøgersen (2005) and Pape et al. (2011) note that there is a knowledge-to-action gap as consumers’ efforts to translate available information into action is not always straightforward. Markkula and Moisander (2012) note that the “need to better educate and empower consumers in taking active roles in sustainable development still remains a major challenge” (p.106). As young consumers are in the process of building their consumer identities, understanding consumer socialization and literacy is necessary in order to reduce the knowledge-to-action gap mentioned above and to empower the young consumers into taking active roles in being responsible consumers.

Consumer socialization is “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward 1974, p. 2). Scholars have generated a considerable body of research since 1974 (John 1999, 2008) reviews. John (1999, p. 205) noted that we have “significant gaps in our conceptualization and understanding of exactly what role social environment and experiences play in consumer socialization.” We have much more to learn about consumer socialization during adolescence (John 2008). The same gap also exists in child development (Harris 1995, 1999) and behavioural genetics (Rowe 1994), in which the scholars suggest that outside-of-home socialization takes place in peer groups of childhood and adolescence.

Cook (2004) suggests exploring what competence means for young consumers in different contexts, and that there is a need to take into account social relationships. In socialization studies, context refers to the setting where the interaction with others take place (Harris 1995); for example, home and school are two different contexts of socialization for young consumers. Being outside or being at school with their friends constitutes a different context than being at home or outside-of-home with their parents. Studies on the sociology of childhood and social psychology of socialization have established the importance of social learning in the context of groups in studies of the youth peer culture (Corsaro 2005; Corsaro and Eder 1995; Eder 1995), the implications of which have not been addressed in studies of consumer socialization and the consequently emerging consumer policies. This study moves away from the developmentalist approach to consumer socialization criticized by Nairn et al. (2008) because it “pays relatively little attention to the social dynamics of interpretation, emotion, or peer group influence” (p. 629). The study is located within sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Such aspects of consumption also determine the experiences consumers have within the marketplace, as they need to be versed in enacting their consumer roles. Nairn (2010) suggests that a complementary paradigm is needed to study how young consumers relate to brands. One of the alternatives considered is Consumer Culture Theory (CCT from hereon). CCT refers to theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 868). According to Arnould and Thompson (2005),

consumption is continually shaped by interactions within a dynamic sociocultural context, and is concerned with the factors that shape the experiences and identities of consumers “in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life” (ibid, p. 875).

With its logic of planned obsolescence (Blaszczyk 2008; Faurschou 1987), fashion and clothing markets constitute key problematic contexts in which we can explore issues of challenges to sustainability and practices of overconsumption (Kjellberg 2008; Shankar et al. 2006). Thompson and Haytko (1997) delved into the issues of naturalizing, problematizing, juxtaposing, resisting, and transforming in the case of fashion, however, their analysis is based on accounts of fashion and related practices narrated by adults. The adolescents’ accounts of these acts within the domain of consumer socialization are lacking, and, hence, will be provided in this study. The talk in female friendship groups will be studied to explore what consumer knowledge, skills, and competence means for consumers in different contexts as suggested by (Cook 2004). It features the accounts of the consumption of goods as suggested by Ekström (2006). There is an increasing awareness that it will become necessary for consumer societies to consume less (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). To design the most suitable policy in order to enable young people as competent consumers of the market system, it is necessary to understand in further capacity how they learn to be consumers. Kjellberg (2008) notes that “turning our attention to how actors become rather than to what they are allows us to better understand the process through which over-consumers are created and appreciate how they may (be) change(d)” (p. 160). Therefore, in order to make informed decisions about consumer policy pertaining to overconsumption, materialism, and sustainability issues, it is necessary to look at how young actors become consumers.

Literature that has considered the dark side of consumption (e.g., Durham 1999) has illustrated the possible negative impact advanced consumer societies can have. This study is expected to provide policy makers with information regarding how consumer skills and knowledge are cultivated and the role of the female friendship group in cultivating them, which can be used in formulating future policy aimed at consumer protection and literacy programmes. Young consumers are potentially the solution to such issues such as health problems, over consumption, unsustainable consumer behaviour, etc., since it is possible to increase their awareness of the dire consequences of such issues and render their ties with (over)consumption more informed. Therefore, it is in the interest of the policymakers to understand the dynamics that shape younger consumers’ relationships with consumption, consumer identities, and with each other. Furthermore, in society, women are (still) punished more heavily than men in terms of weight and body shape (Gardner 1980; Sparke 1995) and in the number and content of the fashion and health magazines targeted to women. The focus is on the consumption of fashion as the fashion industry is the most widely criticized industry for having short cycles and for promoting fast consumption (e.g., Blaszczyk 2008; Tadajewski 2009) and for promoting certain types of beauty ideals over others (e.g., Sparke 1995). It is in the interest of policy makers to induce or facilitate behaviour changes, and a clearer understanding of the factors that shape younger consumers’ relationships with consumption and consumer identities is needed.

Literature Review

The literature review comprises of consumer socialization agents, the outcomes of consumer socialization, home and outside-of-home contexts of socialization, and adolescents’ relationships with fashion goods. The section ends with the presentation of the research question.

Socialization Agents

John (1999) notes that developments in consumer socialization are situated in a social context including family, peers, mass media, and marketing institutions. While contexts of socialization refers to the actual physical contexts of home or outside-of-home (see Harris 1999), socialization agents refer to people or institutions that adolescents have contact with in each of their contexts. Parents, peers, and mass media are the main socialization agents (e.g., Moschis and Moore 1978). Parent socialization is an “adult-initiated process by which developing children, through insight, training, and imitation acquire the habits and values congruent with adaptation to their culture” (Baumrind 1980, p. 640). Moschis and Churchill (1978) report that families can have a significant influence on the child’s acquisition of consumer skills. Ward and Wackman (1973) showed that parents’ general consumer goals included teaching their children about price-quality relationships.

Whether knowledge of certain product categories’ prices can be taken to mean that the children have learnt rational skills about either those products or the marketplace is not certain. The amount of parent-adolescent communication about consumption is not related to the respondents’ propensity to use price in evaluating the desirability of a product and the more parents talk to their children about such consumption issues, the more the children have the propensity to use peer references (Moschis and Moore 1979). The parents as teachers approach overlooks the parents’ own symbolic consumption activities. Whether children actually learn what their parents teach them regarding consumption can be further debated, especially taking into account the viewpoint that parents may not have long-term consistent effects on children: The effects of the styles of parenting on children’s personalities and behaviour (and socialization in general) are neither strong nor consistent (Maccoby and Martin 1983).

Studies have documented that adolescents are very susceptible to peer influence (e.g., Mangleburg et al. 2004). Moschis and Churchill (1978) reported that peer influence increases with age. John (1999), however, reports that “a surprisingly small amount of research exists on the topic” (p. 206). Ten years after John’s review, the number and focus of research on peers as a socialization agent has not grown much (Dotson and Hyatt 2005; Wooten 2006). Furthermore, the studies on the topic do not adopt a *peers as context* approach.

According to Pipher (2002), establishing and maintaining friendships with other women is an important aspect of psychosocial development, and as girls become adolescents, these kinds of relationships become more important as they help the adolescents adjust to their new roles. Women frequently mention talking as something that helped form the basis of their friendship (Caldwell and Peplau 1982). “[young girls] engage in long, intense talks; but to sustain the interpersonal connection, girls often need the pretext of an activity” (Sheehy 2000, p. 148). This resonates with the work of Bloch et al. (1994) in that the location may itself be a site of pleasurable experiences that consumers enjoy. Malls, for example, are important meeting places, especially for young people (Feinberger et al. 1989) and the pretext of an activity for female friendship groups can be shopping, as demonstrated by the importance of the mall for female adolescents’ friendship groups (Haytko and Baker 2004). Furthermore, family communication about consumption is found to increase with the amount of peer communication in adolescents (Churchill and Moschis 1979). Churchill and Moschis (1979) suggest that family communication about consumption leading to communication with peers must be interpreted in line with Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory in that “the child’s need to evaluate some consumption-related cognitions learned at home may cause her to seek out others who are similar and initiate discussions with them” (Churchill and Moschis 1979, p. 32).

Mass media is cited as the third socialization agent in consumer socialization literature (e.g., Bush et al. 1999). Evidence is mixed: Adolescents who watch more television were found to have higher levels of materialism (Churchill and Moschis 1979). However, the causal direction is unclear: exposure to peers and television might encourage materialism or materialism might encourage a search for information about valued goods from sources such as peers and television advertising? (John 1999, p. 202). “the child is no longer expected to see the world as adults see it...S/he watches and is being watched by the others...other directed child is socialized through media and peer groups by learning how to be a good consumer, consumer of relations, images, and experiences” (Süerdem 1993, p. 434). It must also be taken into account that both parents and peers live in an environment where media is a part of their lives, and perhaps it is not possible to single out the effect of mass media.

A number of studies in consumer socialization have tried to address the relative impacts of various socialization agents on consumer socialization (e.g., Churchill and Moschis 1979). These did not particularly focus on the concept of context. An examination of the socialization contexts needs to be provided for better understanding of consumer socialization dynamics. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning takes place only within social interaction encounters with others, indicating that interaction with peers is an important facilitator of learning and socialization. This has also been reflected in consumer socialization: John (1999) notes that “one can imagine that many aspects of socialization, including an understanding of consumption symbolism and materialism, arise from peer interaction” (p. 206).

A majority of the studies in consumer research had suggested friends teach the symbolic consumer skills and knowledge, which were often linked to negative habits such as materialism and conspicuous consumption. It is possible that adolescents strengthen both rational and symbolic skills within their friendship groups. Symbolic skills, knowledge, and practice are important socialization outcomes (John 1999) and developing a consumer identity is a key asset a young consumer needs to survive in the market society, especially in one today that revolves around issues of sustainability and overconsumption.

Dotson and Hyatt (2005) listed socialization factors as irrational social influence, importance of television, familial influence, shopping importance, and brand importance. The irrational social influence in their account was primarily a measure of the importance of social interaction, especially with peers, dealing with marketplace activities, and it was assumed to be irrational, value expressive, and normative in nature. Given the largely cultural shifts and new outlooks in consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005), this classification of socialization factors, especially irrational social influence, were reconsidered in light of Cook’s (2004) point that we needed to explore what competence meant for consumers in different contexts. Value-expressive social influence is classified as irrational and less relevant than rational familial influence. This is a problematic treatment of the consumer socialization agents and outcomes. This study aims to re-assess the usefulness of different sets of skills acquired as a result of consumer socialization and uncover that symbolic skills are as much needed as the rational skills for the young consumers to be able to operate in the marketplace. As suggested by Cook (2004), social as well as market relationships in consumer socialization will be studied. Overall, that children and adolescents learn from their peers and friendship groups (Harris 1995, 1999), and that parents do not have any long-term consistent effects on how their children behave (Maccoby and Martin 1983; Rowe 1994) are used as key pieces of literature in order to identify the research question.

For example, the amount of parent-adolescent communication about consumption is not related to the respondents' propensity to use price in evaluating the desirability of a product and that the more parents talk to their children about such consumption issues, the more the children have the propensity to seek and use peer references (Moschis and Moore 1979). Moreover, the parents as rational skills teachers approach also overlooks that the parents themselves exhibit symbolic consumption. The issue of whether children actually learn what their parents teach them regarding consumption arises as one to be debated, especially taking into account the viewpoint that parents may not have long term consistent effects on their children, meaning the effects of the styles of parenting on children's personalities and behaviour (and socialization in general) are neither strong nor consistent (Maccoby and Martin 1983).

Overall, information provided by the family was seen to be superior in the sense that it was conceptualized to help in the process of instilling rational skills to the consumer behaviour of adolescents (e.g., Moore and Stephens 1975; Moschis 1985; Parsons et al. 1953); interactions with parents was seen as contributing to the child's learning of the goal-oriented or rational elements of consumption (Churchill and Moschis 1979). The information transmitted by friends and the media were labelled irrational, expressive, conspicuous and materialistic, conceptualized as helping in the undesirable process of instilling desires into the consumer behaviour formation of adolescents (Bandura 1977; Churchill and Moschis 1979).

Contexts of Socialization

Researchers report that the context of socialization may be outside-of-home (e.g., Rowe 1994). Harris (1995, 1999) argues that intra- and inter-group processes, not dyadic relationships, are responsible for the transmission of culture and environmental modification of children's personality characteristics. This perspective explains the shaping of characteristics in terms of the child's experiences outside the parental home, and suggests that outside-the-home socialization in urbanized societies takes place in peer groups (Harris 1995).

All children and adolescents have at least two different environments: home and outside-of-home. Each environment has its own rules of behaviour, punishments, and rewards (Harris 1999). People behave differently in different social contexts (Carson 1989) but carry memories from one context to other. This does not imply transfer of what is learnt in one into another context (Detterman 1993). Harris (1995, 1999) suggests that children may learn separately, in each social context, how to behave in that particular context. Young consumers are not incompetent members of the adult society; they are competent members of their own society, which has its own standards and culture (e.g., Corsaro 1997).

There is a membership component to socialization. "To be socialized is to belong, identification with the socializing group makes one more receptive to their influence and motivated to be socialized in accordance with their standards" (Gecas 1981, p. 166). When individuals categorize themselves as members of a group, they identify with that group and take on its rules, standards, and beliefs about appropriate conduct and attitudes (Turner et al. 1987). If adolescents categorize themselves as adolescents, then they take on the rules, standards, and beliefs about appropriate conducts and attitudes of being adolescents. The friendship group becomes the adolescents' natural context outside of home and hence the place/context to study consumer socialization.

Socialization Outcomes

The output of consumer socialization is reported as understanding, knowledge, and skills (e.g., Boush et al. 1994). Most studies deal with rational outcomes such as economic motivations of consumption (Churchill and Moschis 1979), development of materialistic orientations (Moschis and Moore 1978), attitudes toward materialism and conspicuous consumption (e.g., Moschis and Churchill 1978), and materialism and compulsive consumption (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997).

Knowledge in the consumer socialization literature is about products, brands, stores, the act of shopping, and price. Otnes et al. (1994) found that 12–14-year-old adolescents were able to name toy, cereal and snack brands. As children age, their awareness and recall of brand names increase (e.g., Keiser 1975). Knowledge gained as a result of socialization also includes symbolic knowledge: Children start preferring branded and familiar items over generic ones in preschool years (Hite and Hite 1995), this tendency increases through primary school (Ward et al. 1977). Early adolescents already have strong preferences for specific brand names and a sophisticated understanding of the brand concepts and images conveyed (Achenreiner and John 2003). Children start making inferences about people based on the products they use between preschool age and second grade (7 years old) (e.g., Belk et al. 1982) and start using brand names as important conceptual cues in making judgments by the time they are 12 (Achenreiner and John 2003).

Chaplin and John (2005) found that self-brand connections develop between middle childhood and adolescence. Consumption symbolism has been studied in a way that looked at the understanding of social meaning attached to products, and associations between products and people (e.g., Belk et al. 1982). However, the literature is lacking studies on the symbolic meaning of brands and consumption, and how they are used in the building of identities in young consumers. In addition, this topic has not been explored in the consumer socialization context in a way that reflects the CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005) approach, which takes social relationships into account as suggested by Cook (2004).

Adolescents and Fashion Goods

Young consumers and their fashion clothing consumption have been extensively studied (e.g., Belk et al. 1982; Piacentini and Mailer 2004). Fashion has been used in studies concerning adolescents' brand sensitivity (e.g., O'Cass 2004), and the studies in the reference-influence field have always referred to peers as a fluid entity, not taking into account what effects the closeness of one with her/his friends may have on the actual influence and the related outcomes arising from that influence. The reference-group influence is more likely when the degree of social interaction or public observation of consumption behaviour is higher (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

Adolescents are in the process of completing their rites of passage, with feelings of uncertainty and insecurity as to how to behave and how to evolve into new roles (e.g., Arnett 2004; Ozanne 1992). Rights of passage are personal and social experiences that are partially constructed through the use of material objects (Fischer and Gainer 1993). Fashion goods are such material objects (Gilles and Nairn 2011). Use of and dependence on symbolic properties of goods in order to help them in the new target role is common among people in role transitions (Leigh and Gabel 1992).

Consumption habits assume a greater role in setting apart the adolescent from the adult; and this becomes more important when initiation rights are not present Ozanne (1992).

Fashion and Gendered Consumer Identities

Gender identity is a social construct that reflects the cultural context in which people live (Kacen 2000) and as Harris (1999) notes, “Gender identity—the understanding that one is a boy or a girl—doesn’t come like a label attached to the genitals... how we categorize ourselves depends on where we are and who is with us” (p. 227), therefore, it is likely that adolescents will construct their gendered identities within different environments that they are part of. As products are consumed in order to create, transform, and re-create a sense of identity (Belk 1988; Bocock 1993), gendered identities of adolescents are likely to be created, transformed, and re-created through the use of products such as fashion clothing.

According to Finkelstein (1991), the mere fact “that the fashion endured for so long underscores the argument that character was accepted as being evidenced through one’s physical appearance, in this case, that feminine qualities were expressed by the hourglass figure” (p. 132) and Banner (1983) argues that in a time when the beauty of the body is the female’s greatest social asset, clothing has been made to accentuate it. While appearance may be considered as a hallmark of personal identification, it is also of interest to explore fashion’s role as communication for the female adolescents the practices of constructing a female identity, as early adolescence is the beginning of gender identity formation (Erikson 1968). The way one appears has been of great importance to the individual’s sense of identity across time and cultures (Finkelstein 1991), and Chodorow (1978) points out that feminized self is understood and defined in relation to one’s relationships, bringing in the role of friendships. Durham (1999) reports that the friendship context is a place where gender identity is formed through mediated standards of femininity. Therefore, what role fashion plays in building gendered identities needs to be explored.

In today’s society women are (still) punished more heavily than men in terms of weight and body shape (Dwyer 1973; Grogan 2008). This is evident in both the clothing styles seen as appropriate for men versus women (Gardner 1980; Sparke 1995) and in the number and content of the fashion and health magazines targeted to women. Kang (1997) noted that the portrayals of females in advertisements had essentially not changed since Goffman (1959) study on the topic. Mulvey (1975), for example, argues that the images that girls are exposed to convey the male standards for female beauty. Furthermore, the negative effects of the images in displayed by the fashion industry have been the object of criticism; for example, Richins’ (1991) work on social comparison with idealized images in advertisements, the works of Stephens et al. (1994) and Wolf (1991) suggest that such images exposes females to the risks of anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

There are gaps in consumer socialization, literacy, and sustainability and consumption within the fashion industry literatures that need to consider “what role do parents, teachers focus, peers, other interest groups, media, advertising and marketing communication play in consumer socialization?” While Moschis and Churchill (1978) argued that the parents are the main socialization agents responsible for “rational” education while the primary blame for the

negative outcomes of consumption rested with peers, this might be rather different today. This study focuses on the role played by friendship groups, hence, the broad research question addressed here is:

What is the role played by the friendship groups and the consumption of fashion in consumer socialization? More specifically, the study aims to answer the question—Do friendship groups cultivate both symbolic and also rational skills?

Method

Nairn (2010) suggests that “a shift toward interpretivism would ensure fuller representation of children’s voices in research into fashion consumption” (p. 214). Given the study’s interest in understanding the adolescents’ own accounts in a complex setting featuring relationships and dynamics, interpretive approaches lend themselves to understanding the adolescents. Interpretivism emphasizes the meanings people attach on their own and others’ actions and aims to understand the world of the lived experiences from the viewpoint of those who actually have those experiences (Schwandt 1994). The focus is on specific phenomenon in a particular place and time, with an aim to determine motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time and context bound (e.g., Hirschman 1986). In interpretivism, “Reality has to be constructed through the researcher’s description and/or interpretation and ability to communicate the respondent’s reality” (Szmigin and Foxall 2000, p. 189).

Shankar and Goulding (2001) note that “there will always be multiple ways of “seeing the world” and that each will have its own merits, strengths and weaknesses. Since the “interpretive researchers’ goal is not the ‘truth’ because it can never be proven, rather their goal is hermeneutic understanding or *verstehen*The choice of interpretive technique will guide the entire research process from research design (although this always tends to be emergent) through to data collection, analysis and finally interpretation. But we should always remember that what we are offering is only *an* interpretation not *the* interpretation” (p. 8), the authors will adhere to this principle.

Which specific method to use is going to be chosen based on the nature of the research question: Because consumer socialization has not been studied from a friendship group perspective, a deep understanding of the dynamics and of the interaction between individuals is needed, and hence, qualitative research methods, where the inquirer makes claims based on the multiple meanings of individual experiences, and the socially and historically constructed meanings (Creswell 2003) are the most appropriate. The very “group” nature of friendship groups as the non-family external environment (Harris 1995; Rowe 1994), one of the theories that is the reason d’être for the research question, logically suggested a method that would be most insightful for capturing phenomena in a group setting and informing us about the life-stories and interaction that is contained in a friendship group: the focus group method, which is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan 1990) is an excellent method of establishing the why behind the “what” in participant perspectives (ibid). As confirmed by Kamberlis and Dimitriadis (2005) “Among other

things, the use of focus groups has allowed scholars to move away from the dyad of the clinical interview and to explore group characteristics and dynamics as relevant constitutive forces in the construction of meaning and the practice of social life. Focus groups have also allowed researchers to explore the nature and effects of ongoing social discourse in ways that are not possible through individual interviews or observations...Focus groups are also invaluable for promoting among participants synergy that often leads to the unearthing of information that is seldom easy to reach in individual memory" (p. 903). Since based on the literature review on consumer socialization, friendship, and fashion, *friendship groups* emerge as structures in relation to which we can study consumer socialization, the *focus group* emerged as a very insightful research instrument in order to try and gain insight into the "why" behind the "what" regarding a group phenomenon. As Eder and Fingerson (2003) note, focus groups flow directly out of peer culture, and hence is a valuable alternative to data collection method for this study.

Eder and Fingerson (2003) also note that synergy in homogenous collectives such as friendship groups often unearth unarticulated norms and normative assumptions. Also, the focus groups are not dependent on individual memory and require the participants to defend their statements to their peers, especially if the group interacts on a daily basis (*ibid*). Since focus groups ultimately capitalize on the richness/complexity of group dynamics, they are the most appropriate method for studying the dynamics and complexity of consumer socialization within female adolescents' friendship groups. Finally, the main strength of focus groups is that they can give the researcher a view into the social interactional dynamics that produce particular memories, positions, ideologies, practices, and desires among specific groups of people (Kamberlis and Dimitriadis 2005).

Eder and Fingerson (2003) also argue that the researcher's seeming power can be reduced if the children/adolescents are interviewed in a group fashion rather than one-on-one, which further justifies the use of focus groups. Also, it is argued that children relax and engage in typical peer routines when they are interviewed in a group setting (Eder 1995; Simon et al. 1992). According to Eder and Fingerson (2003, p. 35): "Group interviews grow directly out of peer culture, as children construct their meanings collectively with their peers...participants build on each other's talk and discuss a wider range of experiences and opinions than may develop in individual interviews."

Therefore, focus groups are suitable devices for data collection taking into account both the research question and the properties of the informants. Some disadvantages of focus groups are that the emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression—a group can be dominated by one person, and "groupthink" may be at work (Fontana and Frey 2005). Focus groups also run the risk of irrelevant discussions, and some participants may find it intimidating to express their opinions and to disagree publicly, hence agreeing with the dominant view. Further, focus groups, have several disadvantages such as the (in)ability of the moderator to conduct the discussion successfully, the danger of one self-selected respondent acting as the group and opinion leader, and the danger of "over-agreement" between the individuals in the focus group (Threlfall 1999). Therefore, although the focus groups may be extremely insightful in capturing group dynamics, and gaining insight into the meaningful

practices and everyday lives of friendship groups, they have their own shortcomings. However, the issues arising from the too talkative and too quiet informants can be remedied by the use of individual interviews where the informants do not have to provide their answers based on what their peers will think of them. Hence, another approach that would help alleviate the issues arising from the disadvantages of focus groups is chosen: in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews would allow the researcher to get a glimpse of the life-worlds of the informants in their own words and descriptions, and to overcome the apparent disadvantages of either some informants becoming shy in a group setting, following groupthink, conforming, or self-selecting oneself as the opinion leader (Fontana and Frey 2005). Therefore, in order to set off the disadvantages of focus groups, in-depth interviews are proposed in order to understand the group consumer socialization phenomenon more deeply. Since children's experiences are embedded in their own peer cultures, it is recommended to use interviews in combination with other methods in order to acquire more valid responses and to strengthen the analysis of data obtained from interviews (Eder and Fingerson 2003). Although interviews and focus groups may not be regarded as different methods, they allow for the researcher to get a glimpse of the phenomenon from different perspectives, therefore, the author proposes to use them as complementary in order to provide different perspectives on the same phenomenon.

The advantages of the in-depth interviews are that they allow for an understanding of the lived daily world from the informant's own perspectives and accounts and for a glimpse into the informants' everyday life world (Kvale 2007), which serves to attain the thick description that is needed to answer the research question. Interviewing is one of the most often encountered and powerful ways that help us understand others (Fontana and Frey 2005). Rather than being neutral data collection tools, interviews are active interactions between people that lead to negotiated and contextually dependent results (ibid). The interviews provide insight into both "how" and "what", therefore, are useful for gaining insight into phenomena (Cicourel 1964; Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 1998).

In-depth interviews, however, carry with them the danger that the respondent, even if the interviewer is friendly, might feel that they are singled out or that they will be judged in the eyes of the interviewer if they give certain types of answers or insights. Some informants might feel more comfortable in a supportive group environment than in a one-on-one interview setting. It is possible to capture a complementary effect between the disadvantages and advantages of focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. Hence, "using both single and group interviews in conjunction can be an effective method for uncovering social phenomena among older children and adolescents...[who] have the developmental capacity to reflect upon their experiences in the manner needed to complete individual interviews successfully. By including single interviews in research, the investigator can examine the participants' individual attitudes, opinions, and contexts and use this information to understand more fully the discussion occurring in the group interview... some themes may be discussed in individual interviews that may not appear in group discussions but are still important and relevant to the participants an their individual understandings of their social worlds. In this way, the researcher can explore social interaction dimensions" (Eder and Fingerson 2003, p. 45). Hence, focus groups and interviews are suitable for use

in conjunction, especially taking into account the research questions. Overall, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field notes will be employed in order to gain insight into different consumer socialization and to avoid idiosyncratic readings of the data.

The informants were selected using maximum variation purposeful sampling (see Patton 1990); the interview informants did not comprise of the shy participants from the focus groups. Data was collected from 12- to 16-year-old females and was analysed using the hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). The background of the informants was varied in terms of public versus private schools and ethnicity. Overall, eight focus groups and 10 interviews have been completed. The list of informants can be found in the table listed below (Tables 1 and 2):

Table 1 Focus group and interview informants

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality/Background	Data collection method
Amy Jody Nelly	14	British	Focus Group 1
Lisa Charlotte Claudia	15	British	Focus Group 2
Shelly Jennifer Linda Rose Tracy Zoe	15	British	Focus Group 3
Laura Amanda Fiona Clara Carla	16	British	Focus Group 4
Gina Milly	16	British	Focus Group 5
Mandy Cathy Rita Kristina Rachel Maria	16	British	Focus Group 6
Randy Naomi Heather Audrey Dita Daisy	16	Asian British, born in the UK	Focus Group 7
Sandy Gloria Nancy	15	Albania, emigrated to the UK when 10 Ghana, emigrated to the UK when 9 Kenya, emigrated to the UK when 6	Focus Group 8

Table 2 Interview informants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Data collection method
Minnie	12.5	Inte China, born in the UK	Interview 1
Hannah	13	Brit British	Interview 2
Donna	13	British	Interview 3
Betty	13	British	Interview 4
Nicky	13	British	Interview 5
Alex	13	British	Interview 6
Nora	15	Ghana, emigrated to the UK at 5 years of age	Interview 7
Susie	15	British	Interview 8
Jackie	16	Ivory Coast, emigrated to the UK at younger than 5	Interview 9
Sonia	16	Kurdish, emigrated to the UK at younger than 6	Interview 10

Access to adolescents was obtained through schools. Numerous high schools in the West Midlands (including greater Birmingham area) in the UK were contacted, delineating the general purpose of the research. Five high schools agreed to cooperate. The sample consisted of both private and public high schools, with respondents equally balanced. In all the private high schools, there were students that were on scholarships. One of the high schools was a girls-only high school with students that belonged to higher income families (Stratford-upon-Avon), the second high school was also private but co-ed (Leamington Spa) with students mostly belonging to higher income families, the third high school was public co-ed (Coventry) and featured students from families whose household income was less than the first two, the fourth high school was also public co-ed (Coventry) and the students came from families with very low incomes, finally the fifth high school was also a private high school with students from families with higher incomes when compared to the third and the fourth. Female adolescents between 12 and 16 years of age were contacted. The informants' and their parents' consent were obtained before proceeding with the data collection. The friendship groups were identified and invited to take part in a focus group. So, each focus group comprised of one friendship group, therefore the number of participants in each focus group varied. Overall, the data collection stopped at eight focus groups and 10 interviews as the data were saturated. The focus groups were conducted first, and the data collection took place between 2005 and mid-2007. The interviews were conducted between the beginning of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. The focus groups varied in size as the number of adolescents in each friendship group was varied.

Conduct of the Focus Groups

The focus groups comprised of "friendship groups," meaning adolescents were invited to take part with their own friendship groups. Hence, a focus group included only one friendship group. The focus groups took place in the informants' respective schools and were conducted

in a warm and friendly manner. Before starting the discussion, the information about informants' latest purchases, their weekly/monthly allowance, the latest items they bought, what kind of clothes were in their closets, etc. were collected in the form of a single-page, five open-ended questions so as to increase confidence in the credibility of the results. Non-directive questions allowed the adolescents to expand on their friends' answers (Eder and Fingerson 2003). Interaction of this kind is characteristic of the style of discourse in peer cultures and is representative of the natural way young people develop shared meanings (Eder 1995). The focus groups started with broad questions to each of the informants about the subjects they study, their past-time activities, and interests, after which the questions regarding the researcher's topic list were brought up by the researcher, at the same time letting the conversation flow.

Conduct of the Interviews

Before starting the discussion, the information about informants' latest purchases, their weekly/monthly allowance, the latest items they bought, what kind of clothes were in their closets, etc. were collected in the form of a single-page, five open-ended questions so as to increase confidence in the credibility of the results. The researcher had an outline of the different areas that needed to be covered during the interview, which began with the general question (after the introductory questions about age, subjects studied, friends, friendship, etc.): "Let's talk about clothes and what you think about fashion." Because it is important to ask open-ended questions with a young audience (Tamivaara and Enright 1986), the interviews started with a broad question such as "when you think of fashion, what comes to your mind?", "tell me what happens when you and your friends go shopping together" or "Let's talk about clothes and what you think about fashion. What is it about that fashion that you like or dislike?" From then on, the conversation took place around the incidents and stories told by the interviewees. The interviewer extended the discussion to include more specific questions pertaining to clothes, fashion clothes, prices, brands, shops, friends, and shopping with friends. Within these general topics, the interviewer asked probing follow-up questions that were suitable to the informants' descriptions of their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical considerations formed the base of decisions taken when planning data collection: the issues of informed consent, right to privacy, and protection from harm have formed the base of ethical considerations (Fontana and Frey 2005). The interviews ranged from 30 to 90 min in length. All participants were members of middle- and the working-class families, with clear income differences between them. All the interviews were conducted by the researcher and the informants were all the same gender as the researcher, resulting in a more comfortable discussion between the interviewer and the informant while discussing details about one's sartorial/intimate practices (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The informants were all assured of their anonymity and were told that they could access the transcribed interviews if they wished to read them for correction and/or amplification; the interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio tapes and any identifying names and/or references were replaced with pseudonyms (*ibid*). None of the adolescents chose to withdraw their data after accessing the un-interpreted transcripts.

Data Analysis

What Van Maanen (1988) called the “confessional style” has been employed in the reporting of the findings, keeping of the files, and field notes. The authors acknowledge that “the interview is a practical production, the meaning of which is accomplished at the intersection of the interaction of the interviewer and the respondent” (Fontana and Frey 2005, p. 717). When analysing the data, the authors proceeded systematically (Spiggle 1994) and recorded the steps (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985) to ensure the followability of the analysis.

Initially, the researchers read through the entire set of transcripts independently on several occasions, in an effort to develop thematic categories and to identify salient metaphors participants used to describe their experiences of engaging in consumer activities related to clothes, fashion, brands, learning from friends, and being a skillful consumer. The overall analysis and interpretation of the results were based on the guidelines provided by Miles and Huberman (1984), Spiggle (1994), and Thompson et al. (1989). The reading process was done as prescribed by Hirschman (1992) and Thompson et al. (1989): the inferences were based on the entire data set, which was, in turn, based on iteration. Each individual transcript was re-read after the global themes had been established based on individually analysing the transcripts. The iterative process was completed as suggested by Spiggle (1994), where a back-and-forth movement between each transcription and the entire set of transcriptions, following the analysis of each single transcription where the back-and-forth process takes the form of being between passages in the transcription and the entire transcription. It must also be noted that the word “transcript” is used here to mean a single interview or focus group. Through the iterative process of going back and forth between data collection and analysis, where previous readings and codings were allowed to shape the later ones, as described by Spiggle (1994), emergent themes were marked. Overall, the combination of focus groups and interviews contributed to the interpretation of findings and to the fine-tuning of question guides for subsequent focus groups and interviews. For example, certain themes such as using each other’s information as (see section “[Friendship Talk, Information, and Advice](#)”) was checked across focus groups and interviews and both methods seemed to suggest that adolescents also share information flow that contains *rational* skills and knowledge. Such instances of triangulation were applied across the entire study, and the interpretation of the data also took into account the field notes, the questions adolescents answered prior to the start of the interviews and focus groups regarding their latest purchases and consumption habits. As the field notes contained information about how the adolescents within a friendship group related to each other in terms of power (based on observation), these cues were used in shaping the interpretation of the data. The minor differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion and re-reading of the transcripts and through consulting the field notes.

Results

Practice of Shopping with Friends

Learning to Consume through Consuming

This section outlines that socialization outcomes are a set of skills and knowledge learnt by practice, through communication and action; contrary to previous accounts of consumer socialization that argue for the central role of teaching (verbal and observational) in the acquisition of

consumer skills, knowledge, and competence. *Going shopping* (not always *doing shopping*) facilitates the learning of consumer skills by way of setting the stage for communication to begin in the friendship group. This resonates with the work of Bloch et al. (1994) work in that the location may itself be a site of pleasurable experiences that consumers enjoy. It is not solely the act of shopping itself that first-hand facilitates the learning of consumer skills, but it is the existence of getting together, discussing various topics while shopping, or just looking at goods. This both resonates with the conservative accounts of socialization where learning is assumed to occur during the adolescents' interaction with socialization agents in different social settings (McLeod and O'Keefe 1972) and with different readings of the act of "getting together."

Lisa: Starbucks...we all go... and in town... shopping... is like a routine...

Claudia: Yea BIGGG...

Lisa: It's like ... you're in town chatting with your friends and find you are looking at shops... windows...

Charlotte: Yeah... if nothing, you go window shopping....

(Focus Group 2).

That the friendship groups routinely get together and spend time talking to their friends while looking at shops indicates that it is the practice that acts as the facilitating mechanism in consumer socialization. Adolescents use dress/clothes/fashion as a recreational outlet as described by Roach and Eicher (2007), which in this case manifests itself as the practice of shopping:

Gina: As pastime activity, we go to Stratford most of the time, and we go to cinema, we go shopping, hanging around in town really...Like every Saturday!

Milly: It's a way of socializing really...

Gina: It sort of depends on what shops there are...There are some shops like New Look, which we just walk in and out...But then we get shops like Top Shop which like we look cause you know there's stuff in there you like...

(Focus Group 5).

In both accounts, going shopping emerges as a site where the adolescents "chat," merging the two activities together:

Sandy: Yes when we go into town after school we go to New Look and Primark

Gloria: We go into Topshop but don't really buy things from there...it is pricey. We check what's there.

Nancy: We talk about what happened at school that day... or what we are going to do over the weekend...and we look at clothes but don't always buy them... we talk, and hang out...

Sandy: at school we hang out too but we can't really talk about everything...we try stuff on but we don't end up buying them everytime

(Focus Group 8).

Although a purchase need not be made every time shops are visited, the practice of going into shops and trying clothes on and thinking about whether or not to buy these clothes, are how adolescents regularly practice shopping. Descriptions of how they spend their time out of school with their friends are very similar across friendship groups:

Shelly: It's just what we do...

Rose: Tracy has to say "let's go into town Saturday afternoon" because she lives in X and all the rest of us live here... So we have to coordinate...

....

Shelly: We go shopping, then we go to Starbucks...

Tracy: We go into shops...not the very cheap ones...we go to River Island, TopShop...we have a look around...

(Focus Group 3).

The adolescents try on clothes and even though they do not buy them, they practice buying clothes, which contributes to their shopping knowledge and builds on McNeal's (1992) work on knowledge about stores, layouts, product offerings, and brands. This practice, when coupled with the flow of information described below, according to John (1999), is one of the key decision-making skills and abilities in socialization outcomes, becomes the site of socialization. When compared with the open-ended questions the adolescents answered prior to focus groups and interviews, it was noted that the adolescents reported actually making more purchases than they discussed during the focus groups and the interviews.

Friendship Talk, Information, and Advice

Alex's account demonstrates that adolescents exchange information about consumption with one another, be it verbally or otherwise and even when shopping is not an activity that is liked very much in a friendship group, the information exchange still takes place:

Yes I think the way you pick it up [on fashion] is school bags, they have brand names on them. And you hear about them when they are talking about clothes they bought, they mention brand names and where they got them from, or where they are going shopping, or they are just discussing clothes. So yes you do pick up things from them. Some of my friends really do not like shopping. But if I found something I think is good I will say (Alex, Interview 6).

The information flow between the adolescents is not only "irrational" but also "rational" in the sense that was referred to in the previous accounts of consumer socialization. Clearly, the other adolescents used Mandy's view on sales as a source of information:

Mandy: With shoes, I'll wait until the sales. I got boots that were like £80, I got them for 20...Faith shoes..They're usually quite expensive. Nobody picked them up, they should have been 70 or 80 pounds.

Cathy: How much did you get them for?

Mandy: I got them for 20...on Saturday you have to be out when the shops open. And the Next sale, there are people there at 4 o'clock in the morning...

Rita: Oh my god really?

Mandy: yeah, and it's really like all half price, so it's worth going.

(Focus Group 6)

This conversation resonates with Burnkrant and Cousineau's (1975) work in which people were found to use others' product evaluations as a source of information about products. Similarly, when asked about sharing information among her close friends in the interview, Lauren gives the following explanation:

Well it is sometimes when we go to town after school and we look around, we say oh I am going to a party or something and they will say that is not suitable for a party or get

this or get that. So you help each other out, we think about if it is go with the place where you are going to be or not. So yes we do advise each other (Nora, Interview 7).

The adolescents share information about what is suitable for which occasion and that is a way of helping each other out in what to consume. Similarly, as explained by Donna below, exchanging opinions and sharing information makes friends feel more “involved” and brings them closer:

My friend had lots of money for her birthday so we went shopping and I told her what looked good and helped her try on outfits. I think it makes you feel good if you think people want your advice as you think they must think I like quite good otherwise they wouldn't ask for my advice. I think I would be comfortable asking other people as well if they think something looks good or to help me find something. We feel more involved (Donna, Interview 3).

Below, the excerpts demonstrate that the adolescents arrive at negotiated meanings and understandings about certain aspects of consumption within their friendship group through the sharing of information:

Laura: Layering is all in at the moment... sadly... You can buy a tank top from Bank for 40 pounds... If you're gonna layer it you might as well get a cheap one...

Amanda: Exactly! Exactly. I looove H&M... They have all the same stuff as in Topshop and for cheaper. And if you just want it for a season...

Clara: Exactly, like I do it with tanktops

Fiona: Yeah...

Amanda: You only wear it like for a short time... Like those little tops for 3.99, they are good.

(Focus Group 4).

As seen in both interviews and in focus group discussions through triangulation, friendship talk enables the learning of consumption knowledge and skills: the idea that if one is to use an item only a few times one could get a cheaper alternative was negotiated in this focus group discussion. This discourse shows clear links with sustainability discussions: that consumers at times have reservations toward sustainable fashionwear because of the pricing (Markkula and Moisander 2012). The young consumers do not problematize a few time wear of clothes because of pricing issues as seen above.

The excerpts indicate that shared information is not always (if at all) the “irrational” or “conspicuous” information sharing that leads to “irrational” consumer behaviour, as demonstrated both in Betty’s excerpt above and in the focus group discussion about layering and the rationality of buying cheaper tank tops. As the main arena of where the adolescent culture is enacted, the friendship group also stands as the arena that consumer culture skills are learnt and enacted; and information sharing, even if not done purposefully, is one of the shafts of the mechanism. Overall, information exchange and sharing seems to facilitate the building of shared meanings attached to certain consumption behaviour, and the practice/enactment of consumption practices such as applying make-up or getting dressed for an occasion.

Fashion Literacy: Symbolic Knowledge, Skills, and Competence

The following discussions are about developing style, but more importantly, they are adolescents’ accounts of learning a complex and delicate “dress knowledge” and about the symbolism bound up with clothing, similar to the work on the use of professional attire and

performance of roles by Rafaeli et al. (1997). They learn to read perceived relationships between clothing and group affiliation and clothing and individual characteristics, which is a necessary skill for their survival in the marketplace.

Learning to Read Fashion as Communication and Competitively Reading Symbolic Cues

This theme emerged out of the adolescents' discussions of being able to read the symbolic cues in others' dressing. The discussions of reading other's sartorial cues indicated that this skill is cultivated through conversation and discussion with one's friends. To communicate is to use what one has in common (Maffesoli 1996), fashion is understood as a means of communication. Even though the style or the taste may not be common, the interest in fashion is:

A little bit because I think if you have yellows and purples I think that means you are a bit of an eccentric person. I think if you are really in dark black stuff and loads of black make up it means you are a bit gothic. If you dress a bit like me, my friends always say they can tell I am a tom boy because I hate skirts, I hate dresses, I always dress in t-shirt and jeans so you can tell I am quite tom boyish. You can tell if someone is quite girlish by being in pink t-shirts and little skirts and things. So I think sometimes your style can say something about your nature, but sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't (Susan, Interview 2).

Susan reveals that she is able to read the symbolic cues in clothes, associating certain colours with eccentricity, and darkness with Goths, therefore showing that she understands the links between clothing and group affiliation. She also uses these symbolisms to mark her style, her friends' style, and link them to individual characteristics, such as wearing t-shirts and jeans making one a tomboy and the colour pink and skirts being associated with girliness. On knowing how to understand the meaning in others' clothes, Betty has the following account:

I don't think it is necessarily if they know how to dress up it is more of the kind of thing they wear. It probably tells you about their confidence too by what they wear. If they wear bright colours then I always think they will be more confident whereas if you wear dull colours then you want to fade into the background... Well there is a girl in my year...her parents are quite old fashioned and I think because they are not in fashion at all then I think they pass it on to this girl. She is still in to really pretty stuff like an 8 year old would wear, more like that (Betty, Interview 4).

Betty's description resonates with that of Susan's about bright colours and dark colours, not in the meanings attached to different colours and what kind of personalities they imply, but the interpretation itself that certain colours and clothes denote certain kind of personalities. Betty's reading of the colour cues indicates that she distinguishes between those who are more confident versus those who want to fade into the background based on the colours they wear. For her, the "really pretty stuff" belongs to 8-year-old children, hence it is neither fashionable nor acceptable for her age range.

Fashionability, here taken to mean the social and symbolic resources related to fashion possessed by consumers is used both as a means (and an end) of participating in the consumer socialization process and a tool to socially interact with others while making sense of fashion goods. The adolescents negotiate and cultivate the understanding of symbolic meanings attached to fashion consumption practices and experiences through elaboration in their friendship group by way of talking. Therefore, the shared understanding of symbolic meaning emerges as a result of shared knowledge and understanding of others in their friendship group and outside of it. Below is Minnie's account of Alex's appearance management:

... Alex Greene she is ginger and she is a bit of an academic and smart, which is probably how we met because we both go to Greek club. She doesn't wear make-up to school and when she came to my house I gave her a complete make over:

She objected at first but obviously I beat her down and gave her a complete make over including clothes, and then I gave her a photo shoot and it was really funny. But she really liked it and now she wants to learn only it isn't something you can teach it is something that happens. She isn't that popular at school either, she used to tuck in her sports t-shirts into her skirt and she used to do up her top buttons as well which is something that isn't that big but is really effective. And now even though she unbuttons that and doesn't tuck in her shirt any more it just doesn't really change her. It is something that you could count as her being not one of the more popular girls but if she does change it does not immediately make her popular either (Minnie, Interview 1).

Alex's reluctance in reading/responding to sartorial cues as understood by others mapped her onto a different social space within the school. Minnie's account of the cultivation of symbolic skills resonate with the viewpoint that individuals use goods as vehicles for cultivating their identities (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998); and that this process is a way of expressing one's self-concept and how one is connected to the society around her/him (Elliot 1999). Not wearing make-up and tucking in her shirt are signs of Alex being "not popular," and Minnie is acting like the "popular" agent, giving Alex makeovers. However, according to Minnie, the fact that Alex does not tuck in her shirt anymore does not make her immediately popular, because she "used to tuck in her shirt." The adolescents use clothing as a tool for managing and interpreting impressions, and to signal that the person in question is like other people who wear similar clothes. These fine distinctions and understandings can be read as issues of naturalizing, problematizing, juxtaposing, resisting, and transforming in the case of fashion as outlined by Thompson and Haytko (1997).

Understanding the Symbolic Meaning of Brands

The below discussion about brand names reveals that the adolescents have cultivated skills that enable them to symbolically read brand names, and to criticize their meaning:

Laura: Ralph Lauren is just a pony!

Amanda: You used to be into it.

Laura: No no no... I used to wear it a lot more but now I choose to keep my money...

Fiona: I think you could get a designer jacket and then you can just wear tops from H&M or Topshop or whatever and you still could look good...

Amanda: You don't need to wear labelled underwear or anything... you don't even care... Anyway brand are just like a label...

Laura: I want more individual stuff anyways... Because everyone's got the same... (Focus Group 4).

Laura defines Ralph Lauren as "just a pony" and when reminded that she used to be into it, she responds that now she chooses to keep her money, which shows that she recognizes the symbolic messages brand names (in this case logos) convey and discounts them. She criticizes what it means, reducing it down to "just a pony," which shows that she diminishes the value of the brand. As can be seen by Fiona's comment, they have figured out that buying one key designer item and teaming it up with less expensive pieces is a good way of looking good without spending on brand names. "Brands are just a label" is a way of diminishing the

meaning of the brand name, and perhaps the value of the monetary cost attached to it, hence, it almost acts a protective barrier.

Solomon (1983) suggested that product symbolism is often consumed for the purpose of defining behaviour patterns associated with social roles and that the consumer relies upon the social information inherent in products to maximise the quality of role performance. Claudia and Charlotte want to maximise their role as “nice girls” and stay away from the meaning associated with the Playboy brand, negatively symbolically consuming it (Banister and Hogg 2004):

Claudia: We wouldn't wear Playboy, anything Playboy

Charlotte: Yes, obviously if you wear it, it means you are an airhead... you know what it means, you're easy. (Focus Group 2).

Because the brand “Playboy” denotes easiness according to them, they stay away from this brand in order to avoid being associated with the agreed-upon meaning of that brand.

The importance of the authenticity in the performance of identity (Elliott and Davies 2006) is evident, and it stems from of competitively reading symbolic cues:

Laura: If someone is wearing brandnames, that means they can afford it. They are showing off. It is nice to have some clothes that are brandnames, but it does not make sense to have brandname underwear, no one sees it anyway.

Amanda: But there are people like Chavs on this course...They get all the new things... trainers or Burberry caps.

Laura: Burberry is like a real good made but now, the Chavs...I have a Burberry handbag and the thing is you can't wear them because Chavs wear them...

Fiona: I think it's just because stuff become more common... that's why and adopts it and Chavs start wearing it...(Focus Group 4).

In this friendship group, the adoption of the brand Burberry by the *Chavs* is used as the basis for the discussion and interpretation of symbolic cues and statements. That the *Chavs* have started wearing Burberry and the implications of this for the non-use of that brand in their friendship group is arrived at after a collective discussion, as seen above. Furthermore, as *Chavs* are not generally associated with Burberry, their ownership and display of Burberry branded items are perceived as inauthentic by the adolescents

A paradox emerged out of the adolescents' discussions of fashion and its consumption. While one of the respondents realizes that judging people by the connotations of what they are wearing may be misleading, she also seems to make automatic links between the clothes and the character, a topic which is has previously been treated in other disciplines (e.g., Davis 1994, Miller 2010):

Well most people judge people by what they wear so if someone is wearing something too revealing then you automatically think that person is a bit, well you think by the clothes that people wear you get a judge of what their personality is and what they like to do and their interests by what they wear (Nicky, Interview 5).

Adkins and Lury (1999) maintain that the techniques involved in the performance of self-identity concern aesthetic or cultural practices and that these performative aspects of the self constitute cultural resources. The acts of discussing fashion and being fashionable may enable the communication flow between the adolescents in a friendship group, which, in turn facilitates their socialization into being consumers, which are cultural resources that are needed to operate competitively within the consumer culture. Triangulation between focus group and

interview data has enabled a clearer interpretation of the emergence of understanding symbolic meaning of brands as a key consumer skill.

Extending the List of Skills: Building and Performing Gendered Consumer Identities

Successfully building and enacting gendered consumer identities emerges as a key skill that should be considered among socialization outcomes. Early adolescence is the beginning of gender identity formation (e.g., Erikson 1968), and according to the data, building and performing gendered consumer identities is very much like a skill as defined in the outcomes of consumer socialization. While the analysis considered dress knowledge and skills, it has been noted that such discourses and practices are heavily gendered. Minnie's reading of symbolic cues in her friend's outfit below demonstrates that fashion, its interpretation, and consumption cannot be separated from gendered identities:

Isla... customises her school uniform, she rolls her school skirt up five times. I roll my skirt up as well but it is because it gets dirty at the back. But she rolls her school skirt up five times and she always wears patterned tights to school...She tends to wear very revealing clothes as well... backless tops or halter necks. She doesn't wear anything normal, she is very much into fashion, she must have a matching outfit when she goes out...Well she takes ages with her clothes... has lots of free time and I think she spends an hour every Sunday experimenting with different hairstyles and make up and clothes and I think that is a bit too much. She is a bit of a slut...she wears lots of short skirts (Minnie, Interview 1).

Minnie concludes that someone at her school is a "slut" because she wears lots of short skirts and revealing outfits. She is reading into the image pasted together by her friend, and is picking up on cues like "too revealing" and "pattern tights." She associates such attention to one's appearance with having lots of free time, and almost expresses it in a derogatory manner. Hence, Minnie uses the symbolic meaning in clothes to make sense of the people and the world around her.

Susan refers to the look of the girls at her school as "a lot of makeup," in a way similar to use of the "granola-ish" metonym in Thompson and Haytko's (1997) study. This categorization implicitly places Susan with the opposite type:

A lot of makeup... I am like one of 10 girls in the school that doesn't wear makeup. The only one I discuss eye makeup is Minnie because she will try to drill into me about makeup so I was wearing it just to impress Minnie... Our school tends to be a lot of makeup, short skirts and everybody seems to be quite tall, maybe because I am only in year 8 but everybody does seem to be quite tall (Susan, Interview 2).

Susan's account, like Minnie's below, resonates with Chodorow's (1978) work: the gendered identity is formed in relation to social relationships. Minnie's consumption of make-up is a marker of the social space she occupies at school and among her friends; her construction of her own gendered identity and understanding of what wearing make-up means goes hand in hand with her social identity:

I wear eye liner and lip balm...sometimes I might wear mascara but...I don't wear that much not compared to some people. There are lots of people who don't wear any make up but because I am one of the more popular girls I'd tend to be really weird if I didn't. Its not that I feel I look better it's just I feel more confident if I am wearing eye liner, I don't know why (Minnie, Interview 1).

Because some of the data was collected during the half-term vacation, having sleepovers was a central activity among the 12–13-year-old informants. The descriptions of what goes on during the sleepovers indicate that they teach each other how to dress and make-up competitively during sleepovers:

...I am quite good friends with some people who aren't that popular like Susan ...she is going to pick me up after the interview...I am going to her house for a sleepover. She doesn't care what she puts on at all...She is nice but she has some slightly weird habits, she eats carrots raw...But she doesn't care what she wears, she tends to wear tracksuits and a baggy t-shirt... she rides the horse a lot and she has clothes for riding a horse, she doesn't have any nice clothes. She doesn't own a single dress or a skirt, she is very tom boyish...she has recently started to get a bit clingy to me, she wants to learn how to apply eyeliner properly, so I think she has decided she wants to fit in a bit more (Minnie, Interview 1).

There are consumption issues that seem to tie in with being not that popular, such as not caring about clothes and eating raw carrots, which seem to constitute “weirdness” according to Minnie. Minnie interprets Susan’s recent intimacy with her as “wanting to learn how to apply eyeliner... deciding to fit in a bit more.” This is important point because wanting to wear eyeliner is taken as a declaration of wanting to fit in. Secondly, the adolescents turn to one another to learn such skills as putting clothes and make-up on.

Hence, socialization context is where skills are practiced and identities are negotiated. Also, “the consumer often relies upon the social meanings, especially when inherent in products as a guide to the performance of social roles, especially when role demands are novel” (Solomon 1983, p. 319). Overall, the girls’ socialization into the consumer culture entails strong links with the meanings associated with self-identity, social-identity, and fashion (e.g., Thompson and Haytko 1997) and the friendship context is a place where gender identity is formed through mediated standards of femininity (Durham 1999).

Conclusion and Discussion

The main findings of this study are that first, the adolescents cultivate symbolic and other consumer skills and knowledge through practice and talk within their friendship groups. Secondly, friendship groups also facilitate the cultivation of the so-called rational skills. Thirdly, consumption of fashion emerges as one of the forces that help cultivate gendered consumer identities. Finally, there is room for interception in adolescents’ understandings of the dark sides of consumption especially with regards to issues of sustainability and fashion imagery and stereotypes. Since the findings indicate that policy needs to take into account the performative aspects of consumption and the symbolic skills necessary for survival in the market system, if there is to be an interception or intervention in the form of a taught consumer literacy class, the curriculum needs to build around knowledge and activities that enable the practice of performative aspects of consumption.

The findings contradict previous studies where parents were responsible for the rational skills and knowledge transmitted and the peers were responsible for the cultivation of materialistic and conspicuous consumer skills and knowledge (e.g., Moschis and Churchill 1978). This study was built on the adolescents’ lived experiences of participating in the marketplace, both with and in relation to their own friendship groups, therefore it took into account that there is not just one environment for a young consumer and studies the dynamics

in one of these environments that young consumers spend a significant proportion of their time in, namely, the friendship group. As Cook (2004) noted, consumer socialization studies needed to consider the meaning of competence for young consumers in different contexts and this study has expanded our understanding of the issue. The findings build on the works of Belk et al. (1982) on development of consumption symbolism and work on children's recognition of symbolism in children's products in that they provide a snapshot of the older (adolescent) consumer in relation to one specific product category and the symbolic meanings derived from consuming fashion products and the act of consumption.

The European Commission's 2012 document on Knowledge-Enhancing Aspects of Consumer Empowerment highlight the search for new approaches in addressing consumer education and empowerment: "Innovative approaches, such as social marketing, strategies based on social norms, or behaviourally informed new forms of smart regulation may have a better chance of success than traditional information and education efforts" (p. 7, 2012). As friendship groups are the normative aspects of a young consumer's outside-of-home actions, the interventions based around friendship group activities may yield better results than one-to-many teaching methods. As the European Commission further notes, consumer empowerment needs to reach beyond awareness-raising campaigns, hence, this study suggests that by incorporating symbolic skills as necessary marketplace knowledge, the scope of consumer empowerment could be broadened and be inclusive of other aspects of consumer behaviour and decision making than information acquisition or attribute-based decision-making. Consumer education, which traditionally focused on the transfer of skills in responsible (household) budget management, understanding advertising and marketing, knowledge about consumer rights, sustainable lifestyles and media literacy now need to include the symbolic aspects of consumption and advertising knowledge and how young consumers could tackle such issues.

In 2009, OECD made policy recommendations to national governments, urging them to incorporate consumer education into school curricula. They noted that consumer education is an important tool for building the confidence that consumers need to operate in increasingly complex markets. According to OECD (2009) "Today consumer education covers more diverse areas than it has in the past. It now covers, for example, consumer rights and obligations, personal finance, sustainable consumption, and digital media and technology" (p. 3). As seen, the OECD has also overlooked the need for a more holistic approach to consumer education which takes into account the key knowledge, skills, and competencies identified by consumer socialization studies. Furthermore, OECD notes "Programme design should be based, when possible, on research into the educational needs of the affected consumers. This research may include surveys, focus groups, and interviews, and draw on related fields, such as information economics, behavioural economics, and sociology," again, overlooking the one of the main disciplines that contribute to our understanding of the consumers and what they need in order to operate as competent consumers of today's marketplace; consumer socialization studies. This study offers policy-making bodies such as the European Commission and the OECD insight into understanding the nature of how people learn to be consumers and what kind of skills they require to tackle the marketplace.

Similar findings and policy suggestions are emerging from around the globe. Studies regarding the adoption and predictors of certain sustainable consumer practices such as green purchasing revealed that social influence was the most important predictor of adolescents' green purchasing behaviour (Lee 2008), further highlighting the important roles of peers in young consumers' development (Brown 1990). Individuals' significant peer network might suggest, cultivate, circulate and reinforce a "norm" of environmental behaviour. Therefore, to young consumers, green consumption carries social meanings and functions, therefore, it is a

form of symbolic consumption (Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004). Lee's (2008) study suggests that interpersonal communication is an effective tool for affecting purchasing behaviour: It points to the importance of buzz marketing in encouraging young consumers to recommend green products to the friends in their group, the principles of which can be applied for other consumption goods especially in need of sustainable behaviour scrutiny such as fashion goods.

Rethinking Cultivation of Rational and Symbolic Skills: Acknowledging Adolescents' Agency

The marketplace culture, consumerism, and the prevalence of advertisements and symbols within the young consumer's lives and how to best equip young people to cope with advertisements and consumption encounters are of interest to public policy makers and NGOs alike (European Consumer Centres Network 2012; Office of Fair Trading 2013, Trading Standards Institute 2013). One example of consumption as a social and cultural process is the way in which the fashion/beauty media instill in women and girls a desire for the products and services they see portrayed on countless screens and pages (Budgeon 1994). Thompson and Haytko (1997) criticized the teenager magazines and pointed out that fashion discourses, which form the backbone of these publications "indoctrinate consumers into an ideology of consumption, immers[ing] consumers' self-perceptions in cultural meanings and social ideals that foster depthless, materialistic outlooks, and a perpetual state of dissatisfaction over one's current lifestyle and physical appearance" (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 16). One of the outcomes of consumer socialization was found to be gendered consumer identities. Products are consumed in order to create, transform, and re-create a sense of identity (Belk 1988; Bockock 1993), and this study illuminated that gendered identities of adolescents created and transformed through the use of fashion clothing in one's friendship group. This builds on Chodorow's (1978) suggestion that the feminized self is understood in relation to one's relationships. An implication of the results of this study is that friendship groups also help cultivate positive consumption skills and knowledge that will be useful in the consumption practices of young consumers and that friendship groups provide a setting where fashion discourses can be interpreted in a way that enable the adolescents to cultivate the thinking skills necessary for enacting the role consumer. Because meanings were attached to products, brands, and consumption experiences within the friendship group, public policy makers and educators alike need to take into account how best to tailor their messages to such an environment and provide information in a way that will make use of the role of the friendship group in developing useful symbolic and rational consumer skills and knowledge.

One of the key findings of the study is that the young consumers are far from being passive students of consumer socialization; they have agency in terms of making sense of the marketplace and are active in creating and modifying meaning of fashion, its consumption, being a consumer, and having a gendered identity in the marketplace. Therefore, any programme looking to modify their behaviour in terms of sustainability issues, for example, should seek to find itself a place in everyday adolescent talk rather than be part of a top-down taught process. This strategy also fits with the finding that advertising is a source of everyday talk for adolescents (Ritson and Elliott 1999). To break into the friendship group, it will be necessary to further understand the group norms, especially paying attention to what the normative concept of "cool" (in the sense of acceptable) is for adolescents (see Pountain and Robins 2000). This should be evaluated in line with the "wanting to learn eye-liner to fit in a bit more" discourse discussed by the informant Minnie. Such triangulated analysis was made possible through the use of both focus groups and in-depth interviews.

Isaksen and Roper (2008) examined the impact of consumerism and consumer culture on low-income British adolescents and found that low-income teenagers are less clear in their self-concept and are more susceptible to interpersonal influence than their high-income counterparts. Tying in with the gap between knowledge and behaviour when it comes to judging others by the connotations of what they are wearing, therefore, becomes a concern to public policy makers since it was found that low-income teenagers are less clear in their self-concept and are more susceptible to interpersonal influence than their high-income counterparts. It is proposed that an inability to “keep up” with the latest fashion trends and its connotations (due to restricted consumption opportunities) may result in a damaged self-concept among low-income teenagers. This will likely lead to increased susceptibility to consumption pressures and will increase the negative sociopsychological impacts of living in poverty. Consumerism, the gathering and purchasing material possessions to increase happiness and social position (Borgmann 2000; Csikszentmihalyi 2000) has been criticized in a myriad of disciplines. Echoing the critics of consumerism who argue that materialism and strong identification with status enhancing brands (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997) has an adverse effect on the social value of society and community, such knowledge-to-action gaps become issues to be remedied.

Limitations and Future Research

The data of this study is 5 years old, therefore, it does not provide the latest snapshot of consumer socialization. This study provides a snapshot in time in that it studied friendship groups at one point in time. The trajectories that friendship groups follow in consumer socialization have not been captured. Secondly, the study focuses on female adolescents, hence, the male adolescents’ accounts have not been explored, and whether their consumer socialization can be studied within a friendship group as the outside of home environment has not been explored. The study, because of the methods that were suitable for the research question, relied on the interpretation of informants’ narratives of their own experiences of becoming consumers and how this relates to their friendship groups, and, hence does not feature observations. Therefore, this study is limited by the “limitations of asking”.

Although it has not been the aim to generalize findings based on fashion goods, featuring other product categories and services would have rendered a more complete understanding of the role of products and their use in consumer socialization. Finally, although the informant base was diverse in the sense that it contained respondents from diverse backgrounds in terms of income and ethnicity, the adolescents had all grown up in the UK, and therefore, provide the UK account of socialization. Consequently, the truly disadvantaged population’s accounts of consumer socialization have not been explored, although there were significant differences between the income levels of the families of the respondents. As noted by Elliott and Leonard (2004), the poor in the UK still experience consumption and exercise choices differently, hence, their accounts are missing from the study.

One of the ways in which the study can be extended is to read the transcripts again and subject them to further interpretation, perhaps in the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), as some of the informants have produced very detailed accounts of their experiences. Another way of extending the current study is through doing more research into the same topic, but with a completely different product category and context, so as to further assess and typologize the role of communication and the role of the actual consumption of products and services in the consumer socialization process. In addition,

since the data has been collected, there have been many changes regarding the mode of communication of adolescents. Social media has an enormous influence in how consumers communicate with brands and with each other, and it is very likely that today's social media chats, for example, is the new mode of interaction in consumer socialization (see Batat 2008; Wang et al. 2012). The points put forth in this study are expected to form the basis of future research. First of all, the study developed arguably what might be called a practice account of socialization and, future research can be undertaken by building on the work. The role of fashion as a communication starter has been established in diverse literatures, but the role of another product or service in creating communication and enabling consumer socialization has not been established yet.

Finally, it will be of great contribution to identify why the opinion leaders or certain individuals in a group are defined as such. In as much as consumer education needs to take into account the above findings, it will also be necessary for a successful education programme to understand how successful interventions in terms of social marketing campaigns are internalized by adolescents and what properties of such communication are more likely to gain acceptance within friendship groups.

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