

## YOUNG CHILDREN AS PARENTS' EXTENDED SELVES

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### ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken to expand our understanding of how parents extend their perception and presentation of themselves through their young children's appearance. The study is rooted in Belk's theory of possessions as extensions of the self (1988), which suggests that others, as well as objects, can serve in this capacity. Fourteen parents of young children were interviewed via a series of semi-structured questions and a photo elicitation technique to gather information about their children's appearance and grooming. We found that mothers generally serve as the gatekeepers of children's appearance, both mothers and fathers view their children's appearance as being extensions of themselves, and both parents utilize their children to create and maintain their own identities. This research contributes to the study of the symbolic relationship between our possessions and ourselves by providing insights into an under-studied object of the extended self: the other.

### INTRODUCTION

While the utilization of material possessions to create personal identities and symbolize who we are to others has been well researched over the past three decades, the lion's share of the research on the topic has been conducted on how we use material objects to symbolize ourselves. Much less research has been conducted on how we use other people as possessions for the same purpose—to symbolize self and social identity. This lack of research on others as possessions is interesting, given that in "Possessions and the Extended Self" Belk included "other people" in his category of "special cases of extended self" (1988, 154 -157). Basing this assumption on William James' work on identity, Belk discussed how significant others, including children, play a major role in the development and maintenance of our self-identity.

Although Belk discussed the use of children as extensions of their parents, this topic has not been researched fully. In 2007, Andersen, *et al.* examined how new mothers use baby clothes to create personal meaning and identities and, in so doing, opened the door to further investigation. This paper presents research that focused on infants' and young children's appearance as symbols of parents' extended selves. Unlike Andersen, *et al.*, who targeted new mothers of infants, we interviewed mothers and fathers; researched the parents' understanding of their infants and young children as possessions; and focused on the full spectrum of the children's appearance including, clothing, hair, cleanliness, etc. In addition, we probed deeper than did Andersen et al. into the phenomenon of parents utilizing their children as symbols of themselves.

We embarked on the research by asking three questions:

1. To what extent do mothers and fathers engage in the dressing/grooming of their children?
2. To what extent does children's adornment (including hair styles, etc.) reflect that of the parents?
3. To what extent are children utilized as possessions that help create and maintain their parents' identities?

We found that each of the questions we asked had merit and shed light on the meanings that parents attach to their children's appearance, as well as how the parents perceived that their children's appearance reflects back on them.

### THE 'OTHER' AS A SYMBOL OF THE SELF

That products serve as symbolic indicators of the self has been documented for well over five decades. Among the early, seminal work were Levy (1959), Hirschman (1980), Solomon (1983), McCracken (1986), Belk (1988), Kleine and Kernan (1993), and Leigh and Gabel (1992). Through the process of socialization, meaning is attached to symbols, and objects come to direct the individual's behavior as s/he assumes various roles, including taking on the role of the self (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1961). Thus, it would stand to reason that if the self and its roles are defined and maintained through the use of symbols, and that the symbols have shared meaning within the society, then the individual would strive to acquire products that closely define her/himself as s/he views her/him self. In that way one's possessions become a reflection of the individual (Belk 1988).

As mentioned above, although Belk primarily focused on objects as the possessions used to extend the self, he did include a section on other people serving in this capacity and quoted Bateson (1982, p. 3 in Belk 1988, p. 156):

“People these days are fond of pointing out that you are what you eat. That proposition is true enough, but there is another which I think is a good deal more profound, that *you are the company you keep* [italics ours]. Your identity, your self, depends upon the people and things that compose your associations.”

Bateson goes on to say that both the understanding one has of him/herself and one’s development are rooted in one’s associations. Bateson’s ideas are widely held. For example, it is commonly accepted that individuals utilize other people and the products/brands they use as extensions of themselves. Perhaps the derogatory terms *trophy wife* and *arm candy* come to mind—pejoratives used to describe a man who creates a certain personal image via young and pampered women. Alternatively, the term *toy boy* connotes the older woman who sports a younger, good-looking guy. And, teenagers are notorious for basing friendships on what others wear and what they drive in an effort to bolster fledgling self esteems. Yet, while this notion of utilizing others as symbols of the self is accepted as fact in our society, scant research in the area of consumer behavior has been conducted on the phenomenon.

Escalas and Bettman (2005) demonstrated that consumers form associations between positive reference groups and the brands they use and then transfer these meanings to the self by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their self concept or possible self. Similarly, White and Dahl (2007) reported that products associated with dissociative reference groups have a stronger impact on consumers’ negative self/brand connections, product evaluations, and choices than do those products associated with out-groups in general. Thus, consumers will avoid products/brands preferred by members of dissociative groups as a means of separating themselves from the members of the dissociative groups. Both studies point to the power of others to provide symbols of meaning to the self.

More germane to our study is the work mentioned previously by Anderson et al. (2007) wherein they assessed how new mothers used their baby’s clothing to develop and maintain the new identity of *mother*. Certainly, there is sufficient research to uphold the belief that identities in transition often translate into the adoption and use of products/brands (McCracken 1986; Klein and Klein 1999; Commuri and Gentry 2000). And, in fact, the researchers did find that the mothers they interviewed consumed “through their children” (Anderson et al., 2007).

What makes the situation of the mother using the child as a symbol of her self unique is that the young child is an innocent bystander in the process. In situations where a teenager uses other teens or an individual uses a reference group as a symbol of the self, the referent ‘other’ acts as an independent agent. A baby, however, is being acted upon. While there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is much give and take between the infant and the parent/caregiver in regard to verbal communication, the non-verbal, appearance-related objects that symbolize the infant, are controlled almost totally by the parents (Stone 1961; Roach-Higgins et al.1995). Symbolic Interactionist, Gregory Stone, dubbed this activity as being a form of investiture—of parents literally placing the symbols on their infants in an effort to communicate meaning (identity). Thus, “[t]he appearance of the infant is imposed” (Stone 1961, p. 406).

## METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation technique (Collier & Collier 1986; Harper 2002) were used to interview a convenience sample of 14 parents of young children between the ages of six weeks and four years old. The six women and eight men were heterosexual, age 32 through 44, married, working, upper middle class, and living in the Los Angeles area. The primary criterion when choosing the informants was that they must have children who were young enough to need to be dressed/groomed by their parents. During the interviews it became clear that some daughters over the age of two chose their own clothing, in these cases we focused on their younger siblings who were still dressed by the parents. Mothers and fathers were interviewed individually and separately in their homes or offices, depending on which location was convenient for them. To ensure anonymity of the informants and their children, we use pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Although the interviewers followed an interview guide, open-ended questions were asked when necessary to probe the informants or clarify comments. Each interview began with questions regarding children’s clothing—who buys the clothes, who dresses the children, the important components of the children’s clothing, and other salient aspects of the children’s physical appearance. Questions ranged from more concrete to more abstract. More abstract questions included how the parents wanted their children to be perceived or not to be perceived by others and how the parents thought their kids’ appearance reflected back on the parents.

Prior to the interviews, the informants were asked to bring photos of their children to the interview. They were not told specifically what kind of photos to bring. Almost all informants had photos uploaded on their computers or on online photo-

sharing sites. Some parents also had print copies in their homes, and all informants had family photos in their offices. During the interviews, the parents were asked to show us the photos and comment on them.

Because the children were not present during the interviews, the photo elicitation technique proved to be extremely helpful in that the pictures reminded the informants of specific aspects about their children's appearance, thereby prompting the parents to provide information that went beyond merely answering our questions. Specifically, the photographs aided the parents in articulating their thoughts, remembering their children's clothing, and reminding them of how their children looked at particular events.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were analyzed both separately and in relation to each other. As much information as possible was recorded on a matrix that included demographic information about the informants and the informants' responses to the main interview questions. This method of recording allowed us to compare all interviews at a glance, identify recurring themes, and spot various differences between informants. The data analysis was an iterative process going back and forth between the interview transcripts, recording findings and elaborating on the emergent themes.

Generally, the specific location of interviews such as ours is not a critical component of the research and is often reported as "a Mid-Western city" or a "large metropolitan area." However, in analyzing our data, it became clear that our Los Angeles venue likely had an impact on our findings. The majority of the parents we interviewed work in some facet of the entertainment/media/fashion industry that under-girds the LA economy. And, it is a well-accepted notion among we who are from LA, that even those who live and work in LA but who are not directly connected with what might be called the *glamour industries*, are highly influenced by that culture. Thus, we believe that what we might call an *LA factor* should to be laid on the table when discussing our findings.

## FINDINGS

It was no surprise to find that the mothers were the primary ones who buy the clothes and dress the children. The stereotypical gender roles also were at play in terms of what factors were important to moms and dads. For a majority of the mothers, style, price, color coordination, and ease of care were among the top factors they seek when buying clothes and dressing their children. For the fathers, practicality, functionality, and weather-appropriateness were the key attributes. Beyond these functional considerations we found that both parents projected themselves onto their children, thus utilizing their children as symbols of themselves. As with the preferred functional aspects of the children, we found some gender differences in regard to this projection.

We conceptualized the findings into three relevant themes that emerged during our data analysis.

1. In-charge moms and helpful dads
2. Kids as 'mini me's'
3. Children as reflection of their parents

In the following sub-sections, we analyze these themes. In each, we begin with the more practical, mechanical aspects of dressing/grooming and conclude with those aspects of the interviews in which the parents discuss the deeper meanings behind their children's appearance.

### **In-charge Moms and Helpful Dads**

As mentioned previously, the majority of the moms interviewed do the majority of clothes shopping for their children and, for the greater part, also decide what the children wear. In general, the fathers go along with what the mothers choose and rarely shop for their children's clothing. However, there are exceptions, where, for example, a father would be more involved with the shopping or choice of clothing, and a mother would not care as much.

Melanie: *Um, and then he'll [her husband] probably also say that I'm really um, controlling, which is true.*

I: *Which is true?*

Melanie: *mhmm, I mean controlling in everything not just the way the kids dress (laughs) I know it's a flaw but it is. I um, I try and manipulate the situation and sometimes I will go back and redress them if I don't like something that they're wearing, for sure.*

I: *And is he accepting of that?*

Melanie: *Yeah, he doesn't care. He's just time to move on we're just trying to get out the door, you know so. He helps get them dressed because I'm making the lunches, like I have to make Elle's lunch everyday so I make the lunch and he gets Elle dressed. We have a little tag team way to get out the door. He takes Miranda, I take Elle, so we share in the burden of getting them ready.*

All of the informants work, and, at the time of the interview all of them, except for one of the moms, had full-time jobs. Therefore, the everyday task of getting the children dressed and ready for the day is a shared chore between the parents.

I: *Ok um does your husband Craig ever dress them up?*

Gina: *mhmm but I'm very um OCD [obsessive compulsive behavior] like I'll have all the outfits, like the shirts in her closet with those pants, and I have all the long sleeve and I separated out like these are the school clothes, and these are the weekend clothes, so if I'm upstairs taking a shower while the girls still need to get dressed he'll know which area to pick from and the outfits are all together.*

Like Melanie, Gina was aware of her rather controlling behavior and her stronger role when it came to the children's clothing, and both mothers seemed to feel that their behavior was flawed. Yet, both were supported by their husbands, who cared more about the practical aspects of their children's appearance and viewed their role as that of a supporting partner who complies with the wife's choices.

Dan: *Uh-uh I-I do from time to time put clothes on them but usually my wife pre-selects the-the clothing in the evening and puts it on top of her dresser and so I don't have to think about it in the morning, all I do is put whatever's there on her. I-I try to dress her, I choose the clothing that goes on Annie maybe once every two or three weeks, honestly, so.*

On a daily basis the majority of the men dressed the children based on either their wife's or daughter's choices. Only on rare occasions did they make these decisions themselves. In discussing the daily grooming of the children, the parents gave insights to the wife-husband dynamics played out through these practices. Typically, the mothers were responsible for shopping for the children's clothes, choosing the outfits that are worn each day, and, in some instances, even laying them out for the fathers, who mostly acted as facilitators by getting the children ready. In the following, Matthew admitted to brushing his daughter's hair, not because he cares but because he knows that it is important to his wife. In other words, he does it to please her.

Dan: *my wife and now my older daughter are kinda fussy about her hair, um I generally don't bother, I would you know let her go to school with tangled hair if she's making at all a fuss or case about it, um my wife will not so in order to appease her I make sure you know her hair is always thoroughly brushed.*

Other fathers, such as Dan, also indicated they often do not care about their children's appearance but perform the tasks because they know it is important to their wives and makes them happy.

### **Kids as 'Mini Me's'**

During the interviews, some parents came to realize that they adorn their children the way they dress themselves. In the case of the moms, this often had to do with choosing a certain style of adornment. With men, practicality was of the greatest importance.

Melanie: *She looks cute there with her little tunic and jeans. Again, it's like the same look, it's like the same thing I wear.*

Melanie, the owner of an online children's clothing business, is very style and brand conscious. As she went through the photos of her daughters she realized that she dresses them very similar, if not identical, to herself. Contrarily, but exhibiting the same behavior, Dan, a senior attorney at a film studio, preferred function in clothing, both for himself and for his daughters.

Dan: *I mean the functionality of the clothing is of really paramount importance to me I guess my wife likes you know pretty dolly you know matching things and all that and I just you know-she's also a very functional person but I mean you know I mean check out my clothes, I'm a freaking lawyer here and people wear like you know fancy*

*loafers and I wear something that's you know rain proof and has like you know my slacks are Dickies you know because I can roll around on the ground with kids in them and they you know throw 'em in the wash and they still have a crease um all cotton you know its like you know in the world of lawyers you know I'm like you know function over form if you look at my neighbor over there he always has nice pressed button up shirt everyday he comes in you know I really can't be bothered.*

Later, he continues:

*Dan: I guess well I think as I dress myself and as I view the world from a very you know utilitarian functional perspective you know I-I- I guess I export those same values on my children you know through their clothing you know selections. I mean granted I'm not going out buying them but I do select them from the drawers that my wife has placed them after being washed and uh you know I'm looking for function you know.*

As previously stated, there were exceptions. Not all of the fathers chose functionality over style. In the following excerpt, Jacob discusses a photo that he liked of his six-week-old son. As we demonstrate further in the paper, his children's appearance was extremely important to him and his wife. In this quote, he is happy that his baby son is dressed like him.

*Jacob: I like the way his beanie was right above his eyes you know not pulled back like usually beanies are, it's more of a you know kind of low rider style... yeah it's just you know right above the eyes the way I would wear my beanie you know just I like the style of it.*

While in the above examples the parents transfer their clothing style to their children, other parents dressed them according to a particular style that is not necessarily a reflection of their own dress style. How they dressed their children ranged from a specific era, such as the 1900s, to looking like Daddy.

*Joan: yeah and that's the other thing is I like to buy stuff that kind of looks like what his dad would wear, you know what my husband would wear, you know I think that's funny.*

Needless to say, the fashion industry has long known of the desire of parents wanting to wear matching outfits with their children and produces apparel, such as father-son matching t-shirts. Brands such as *Kingsley*, *Adore la vie*, *Enter if you dare*, and *Pinkaxle* provide style-conscious parents with the means to express themselves not only through their own clothing but also through identical clothing for their children. In this, we are brought to the core of our research: understanding how children are perceived as reflections of their parents via their appearance.

### **Children as Reflections of Their Parents**

When asked directly whether their children were a reflection of themselves, not all parents were able to articulate clear answers. Some described how they could see their own personality traits in their children, and others focused more on the appearance of their children and how this is a reflection of what their family represents.

In the first example, Gina told in detail how her older daughter was very much like herself in character, and her younger daughter was more like her husband. She is convinced that everyone can recognize the resemblances. She also tied the resemblances to the clothing styles.

*I: Do you think your kids are a reflection of yourself?*

*Gina: Oh yeah, hugely, I think. I don't know how much other people know about us because when I, what I see in Violet, I think she's a reflection of me she is me in terms of her personality, she's very moody, and cranky and um passionate and intense and um she feels strongly whether it's happy or sad or um she has real zest for life, but she's also, she can be very moody which is me she-I think she's very inquisitive and curious like I am, and I just sort of assume that everybody sees that we have the exact same personality, she's very stubborn, um where as Claire is very happy go lucky makes easy, you know makes easy is very easy-it's very easy to make her smile, very relaxed and always generally very even, although she's starting to show a little bit of a temper every once in a while, she's Craig, and I just sort of assume everybody can see that you know she's more relaxed and happy.*

*I: The people that know you two well that is, otherwise you cannot obviously tell that.*

*Gina: oh really? Yeah I don't know I feel like it's obvious (laughs) but um yeah I feel like they definitely reflect us in terms of personality, um in terms of clothing they just- my weekend wear is exactly long sleeve t-shirt and legging*

*and jeans yeah its sort of this relaxed casual kind of trying to be a lit bit more stylish than you know Old Navy every day but basics, very basic so...*

*I: So would you say that your choice of clothing for your kids reflect your choice of clothing for yourself in a sense?*

*Gina: oh yeah, definitely.*

As brought out earlier, Jacob and his wife, Sarah, were very conscious of their lifestyle and how it is reflected in their family's clothing. Interestingly, both of them gave almost identical responses to the same questions, even though they were interviewed separately and did not communicate with each other between the interviews. Below, the conversation is based on Jacob's response to the photographs of his newborn.

*Jacob: um... that one I liked his facial expression but not too fond of the clothing*

*I: ok and then um so it's a baby giraffe and a baby elephant*

*Jacob: yeah*

*I: and then um why?*

*Jacob: I understand it 'cause it's a newborn but that's not what my family represent. ... They [his sons] don't have any Mickey Mouse t-shirts or anything like that, it's just something that we don't-it's just not our family. We snowboard, we skateboard, we surf, we have Harley's we have a low rider, um I like his facial expression but the clothing it's just-it's even though he's a little kid it's too-it's just not our family.*

*I: would you take him out if he was wearing that or would you...*

*Jacob: yeeaaa, I'd take him out if he's wearing it but it's not-it wouldn't be my first choice. I mean if we were going to the store and just grocery shopping or whatever yeah, I don't care, I'd take him out in it. If we were going to a function, no-he's not gonna wear that.*

It was very important for Jacob that his children reflect his family's lifestyle in the correct way. Referring to the baby elephant and giraffe design on the newborn's clothing, Jacob repeatedly stated that it is not what his family represents. As he described his family's lifestyle, he was clear about which clothes were appropriate and which did not represent their lifestyle. This concern was extended to the children's hairstyles.

In this, Jacob and Sarah make a very conscious effort to manipulate their children's appearance so that it represents who they are as a family. With other informants, this desire was not so obvious; but after being probed, they stated that their children are an extension of themselves and provided examples of how this is manifested in their children's appearance.

*I: Not. Um...how do you think your kids reflect on you? Or do you think your kids reflect on you?*

*Abby: They definitely reflect on me. I think children um...are an extension of us as individuals. You know you see some parents who are perhaps into rock music and you see their little kids wearing the black shirts with the attitude statements on their t-shirts. I...you know, they are. They are. They do reflect on me and for the most part I think Kevin and I, again dress comfortably and you know we're not again we do...we do that. We dress a lot in cottons and the kids dress a lot in cottons and stuff like that. So yeah, that's a very fair statement that yeah I agree with that entirely.*

Throughout the interviews it was clear that the parents were anything but disinterested in their children's appearance. Whether the goal was to dress the children in comfortable, easy-to-care for garments or to uphold the family's values through the careful manipulation of every detail of the children's appearance, the parents demonstrated that they had a vested interest in how their children looked and that their children's appearance was reflective of their (the parent's) identities.

## DISCUSSION

Using Belk's (1988) work on others as possessions as a starting point, we began looking for the answer to the question: To what extent are children a reflection of their parents and utilized by their parents as extensions of themselves? Knowing that it would be difficult to impossible for parents to address the question head-on, we chose to concentrate specifically on an activity that is common to all parents, dressing their children. There has been no end of research documenting that adornment is a symbol of the self. Thus, it would be expected that parents would extend themselves through the way in which they dress/groom their children.

To facilitate the study, we asked three sub-questions, (1) to what extent do mothers and fathers engage in the dressing/grooming of their children, (2) to what extent does children's adornment/grooming (including hair styles,

cleanliness, etc.) reflect back on the parents, and (3) to what extent does children's appearance help create and maintain the parents' identities?

Knowing that it would be difficult for subjects to articulate the specifics, we deemed it best to interview parents. In this, we asked a few semi-structured questions, probed for extrapolation, and asked parents to comment on photographs of their children.

To gain a broad perspective, we expanded our study beyond previous, similar studies in which only the mothers' perspectives were taken into account (Cook, 1995; Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006; Andersen, *et al.*, 2007), we interviewed fathers of infants and small children, as well as mothers. By so doing, we discovered that both fathers and mothers take an active interest in the appearance of their children. Although overall the mothers may have held greater sway in what was purchased and worn, the fathers were not silent observers/participants. They had opinions about how their children should look and were actively involved in dressing their children.

Beyond the mechanics of the parents dressing and grooming their children, both mothers and fathers viewed their children as being extensions of themselves and acknowledged that they create/maintain their identities through their children. Some of the parents pointed out how the children wear styles similar to those preferred by the parents and believed that people outside of the family recognized the similarities. Other parents, such as Jacob and Sarah, held very strong notions of how the children should look and talked about the children as symbols of both the parent's personal tastes and the values of the family.

What we did not expect to find, but certainly now recognize as an important component to understanding of children's appearance as an extension of the parent, is the husband/wife dynamic created by and through the children's appearance and the family dynamics associated with the children's appearance. Over and over again we heard one or both parents refer to the other parent when it came to the children's clothing. We got hints of one parent giving in to the other parent on an appearance-related issue. We experienced parents referring to their family's values, lifestyle, or expectations in regard to their children's appearance.

So, it seems that how children are adorned, indeed, is perceived by parents as being extensions of themselves. The parents we interviewed choose clothing for and groom their children fully assuming that the children reflect back on them as individuals, as parents, and as a member of the family.

## CONCLUSION

Although we mined a rich field when interviewing the parents in our study of children as possessions, brought in the here-to-fore unresearched perspective of fathers, and revealed husband/wife and family dynamics as played out through the practices of their children's grooming, our findings on the representation of self through our children is preliminary. The concept of others as possessions is complex. While we concentrated on the investiture of parental tastes, values, styles, and expectations on infants and children too young to choose their own clothing, it would be valuable to conduct similar research on parents of pre-school and older children—those who are developing their own appearance-related tastes and values. Researching teenagers as reflections of their parents no doubt would ratchet up the discussion of family dynamics and add a high level of appearance-related tension to the scenario. It would be similarly valuable to delve further into the husband/wife dynamics associated with children's appearance.

We also believe that our findings likely are contextual. Los Angeles is both a geographical location and a mindset, and within this setting most of our interviewees worked in industries that are known to place a high value on personal image. Thus, while we believe that we shed light on the child-as-extension-of-the-parent phenomenon, repeating the research in different settings and with parents who work in various professions might result in discovering different parental/family dynamics and/or use of different children's appearance-related symbols to represent of the parents.

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