



ARTICLE

Betwixt and Be Tween

Age ambiguity and the sexualization of the female consuming subject

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Abstract. In this article, we argue that what is now known as the ‘tween’ cannot be understood apart from its inception in, and articulation with, the market exigencies of childhood – specifically girlhood – as they have emerged since the Second World War. Drawing upon trade discourses from the children’s clothing industry since the 1940s, interviews with children and views expressed by children’s market observers, we demonstrate how ‘the tween’ (or subteen/preteen) has been constructed and maintained as an ambiguous, age-delineated marketing and merchandising category. This category tends to produce and reproduce a ‘female consuming subject’ who has generally been presumed to be white, middle or upper middle class and heterosexual. Building upon historical materials, we focus much of our efforts on analyzing contemporary cultural commercial iterations of the tween as they have arisen since the early 1990s, a time when clothing makers and entrepreneurs of childhood redoubled their efforts to define a market semantic space for the Tween on the continuum of age-based goods and meanings.

Key words

children • clothing • consumption • gender • girls • sexuality • tweens

‘BOYS AND GIRLS: TOO OLD TOO SOON’ reads the headline of a magazine article. It features white middle-class girls, about 11 and 12 years of age,

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shown wearing make-up, getting their hair done and 'making out' with boys on their bedroom floors. They are preoccupied with being 'popular'. The article matches a concern for these girls' behavior with a moral outrage directed at parents who appear to be at best indifferent to and, at worst, encouraging of the apparent rush to act and be 'older'. This scene is familiar enough today. The article, however, appeared in *Life* magazine in 1962 (10 August 1962: 58–65) with the subheading: 'America's Subteens Rushing Toward Trouble.' The 'subteen', also known as the 'preteen', technically referred to children aged about nine or 10 to 12 years old and was usually applied specifically to girls of that age range. Notably, in addition to its construction as a predominantly feminine gendered category, the subteen or preteen was also constituted as a white and middle-class (and, presumably emerging), heterosexual subject.

The contemporary 'tween', whose age can range anywhere between seven or eight to 13 or 14 years, shares many characteristics with the preteens of four and five decades ago. Common to the cultural discourse surrounding the 'tween' and its preceding categories is the expression of public anxieties about female sexual behavior and mode of self-presentation. A 1999 *Newsweek* (18 October) special feature on 'twens', for example, asks: 'Kids 8 to 14: Are They Growing up too Fast?' Diplomatically dealing with both boys and girls in terms of content space, the article predictably forefronts the morally volatile aspects of girls' consumer desire, physical display and premature sexualization: 'Threads: Decked out in the latest from Delia's and the Gap, girls spend spare cash on whatever's new. Makeup: Brandy and Britney Spears wear plenty, and these neo-Lolitas don't want to be left out' (1999: 62). The authors suggest an inextricable link between the age category of 'tween-ness' and the marketplace: 'No longer a child, not yet a teen, she had officially morphed into a tween, the term marketers have coined for the 27 million children 8 to 14 – the largest number in this age group in two decades' (1999: 64).¹ Another article in the same year in *Entrepreneur* magazine indicates how tween girls represent a better niche market than tween boys; that is, girls represent 'predictable economic stuff' such as accessories, clothes, make-up and shoes (Phillipps, 1999) – the 'stuff' of contemporary feminine consumer display.

In this article, we argue that the contemporary figure of the tween cannot be understood apart from its inception in, and articulation with, the market exigencies of childhood – specifically girlhood – as they have emerged since the Second World War. Drawing upon trade discourses from the children's clothing industry since the 1940s, a few preliminary interviews with young people (twens and teens) and views expressed by

observers of the youth market, we demonstrate how the tween (or subteen/preteen), as an age-based category of the life course, has maintained a simultaneous existence as a gendered (and simultaneously racialized, classed and sexualized) marketing and merchandising category. Building upon historical materials, we focus much of our effort on analyzing contemporary cultural commercial iterations of the tween as a category that has emerged since the early 1990s, a time when clothing makers and entrepreneurs of childhood redoubled their efforts to define a market semantic space for the Tween on a continuum of age-based goods and meanings.

The mixed use of the terms tween, Tween, subteen and preteen is telling of the shifting boundaries and meaning of this persona. In this article, subteen/preteen refers to the 1940s–1970s trade use of the term; tween with a lower case ‘t’ refers to the age range or market in general; Tween with a capital ‘T’ refers to the newly constructed persona and market of the 1990s.

The tween, in its feminine incarnation, registers social ambiguities regarding maturity, sexuality and gender that call attention to uncertainties as to when a girl becomes, and ceases to be, a tween physically, chronologically or culturally (see also Walkerdine, 1998). These ambiguities bespeak moral tensions informing the ‘appropriate’ body, as articulated in the idiom of commerce. The tween girl, both as a biographical person and as a commercial persona constructed through market discourses, resides in an unstable cultural space where ambiguities of social identity invite, even tolerate, polysemous and polyvalent renderings of who ‘she’ is.

We find that the tween girl is both a beneficiary of and is subjected to a ‘trickle down’ of fashion, not as Veblen (1967), Simmel (1971) and Bell (1978) theorized as an upper- to lower-class trickle down of style and prestige, but rather a trickledown process of increasingly sexualized versions of femininity, as situated in their particular historical moments, on to the bodies of young girls. Systematic though it may sound, the trickledown process we describe is fraught with ambivalence and anxiety. As Davis (1992) theorizes, fashion expresses the ambivalence of identity management. In the case of tween girls’ appearances, a complex array of mixed emotions regarding gender, sexuality and age (as well as race, class and other modes of identity) intersect uneasily as they become embodied and visualized. Through their everyday stylings, and in their interactions with peers and the offerings of marketplace identities, girls articulate these cultural ambivalences and anxieties, especially those surrounding female socialization and sexualization (Hethorn and Kaiser, 1998).

Giroux tells us that 'sexualizing children may be the final frontier in the fashion world' (2000: 60). By the end of the 20th century, he asserts, childhood had become 'transformed into a market strategy and a fashion aesthetic used to expand the consumer-based needs of privileged adults who live within a market culture that has little concern for ethical considerations, noncommercial spaces, or public responsibilities' (2000: 18). Yet there is more to this story, we submit, especially in the context of tween sexuality. This sexuality, or sartorial gestures toward it, encodes a sense of autonomy and personhood and has been sought after and welcomed by girls even as it is promoted by certain corners of the industry and decried by social commentators. An aspirational social identity, the tween, by definition, seeks to move out of 'tweenhood' and thus up the age prestige ladder.

We propose the concept of 'anticipatory enculturation' to capture what we see happening in the structures, institutions and practices that jointly gesture towards, and are embedded in, visual and commodity-based webs of meaning in young girls' lives. The term is meant to capture the forward looking element of sartorial and bodily practices of young girls while remaining distant from the teleological assumptions embedded in the kindred sociological notion of 'anticipatory socialization' (Merton, 1957; Stone, 1965). The concept of anticipatory enculturation is also intended to recognize the complex negotiation that occurs between capital interests and girls' agency in their articulations of gender and sexuality. Girls may have little control over media representations, but they do exercise agency in the representations they create in the daily process of contemplating and dressing their bodies. Ultimately, this agency cannot be separated from the marketplace and the cultural spaces it generates – strategically, ambiguously.

In large part, we rely on the statements and constructions made in the discourse of the children's clothing trade as found in the industry's major publication *Earnshaw's Infants' and Children's Merchandiser* (hereafter referred to as *Earnshaw's Review*), which was first published in 1917 and remains in operation today (for a description, see Cook, 2004). Retailers, manufacturers and industry observers share insights about the subteen and the promises and pitfalls of the market for this age range, often relating anecdotes about personal encounters with these girls and their mothers on the sales floor. These discourses combine with others, such as those found in consumer magazines and news accounts, to build variously contrived public 'commercial personae' of the subteen/tween girl. These personae construct the consuming tween by featuring 'her' personality and 'her' desires as they relate to the business of selling and merchandising clothing. In the

following sections, we trace the historical and cultural construction of the subteen/tween concept through an analysis of discourse about girls' clothing, related accessory options in the marketplace and the related ambiguities of sexuality and identity.

FEMININE PERSONAE: THE RISE OF THE SUBTEEN GIRL IN THE CLOTHING DEPARTMENT OF THE 1950S

The concept of 'subteen' or 'preteen' shadowed, as the name implies, as a derivative and diminutive of the 'teen', which had emerged as a clothing size range in the mid-1930s (Cook, 2004). Being a 'teen' or 'teenager', as a common designation for an age stage, came into wide use in the 1940s and, by the late 1950s, was part of the media spectacle surrounding 'youth' in general (Palladino, 1996). The world of white middle-class teenage girls gained social visibility in public culture and, in the process, served as a stylistic and social identity worthy of emulation for many younger girls who were on the verge of their teenage years. 'Teenagerhood', in this way, gave rise to the 'subteen' or 'preteen' girl who aspired to independence and personhood through consumption and personal display.²

In the mid- to late 1950s, 76 percent of the 24,000 public secondary schools in the US had junior high schools for students aged 12–15 years old (Ford, 1960: 10–12). Separate junior high schools effectively made movement through them something of a rite of passage as well as an opportunity for age distinction from those in middle and elementary school. Seeking distinction from those just below them on the age ladder, preteen girls began to encroach upon and appropriate the styles of their 'older sisters' in the 1950s and 1960s.

Advice columns in the 1940s reveal that some girls wanted to wear 'adultlike' clothing and make-up by the ages of 12 or 13. Their mothers preferred that they wait until 14–16 years of age and there was some ambiguity as to what was appropriate; there was no clear rite of passage to womanhood (Paoletti and Kregloh, 1989). Increasingly, in the 20th century, the marketplace has stepped in to fill this void. Whereas, in the latter part of the 19th century, American mothers would lengthen their daughters' skirts or allow them to put up their hair to mark their passage into heterosexual womanhood, today American girls and their mothers tend to 'head for the mall, where coming-of-age is acted out in purchases – such as bras, lipsticks, and high heels, or "grown-up" privileges such as ear piercing' (Brumberg, 1997: 33). Since the 1940s, the apparel industry has made a number of attempts to cater for girls in between the categories of childhood and young womanhood.

Earnshaw's Review did not mention or feature the subteen clothing range, which varied from 10 or 11 to 12 or 13 years of age, until the late 1940s. The origins of the category are unclear. One source attributes the category to the efforts of dress manufacturers who turned out 'toned down' versions of teen dresses for girls a few years their junior (*Earnshaw's Review*, June 1949: 139). Another dress manufacturer related to *Earnshaw's Review* how, in the 1930s, he convinced his fellow manufacturers to begin making dresses in an intermediate range and style that did not yet exist (Dechter, 1961). He recalled hearing about a study in the 1930s discussing how a large number of girls in the seven to 14 clothing size range (that is, girls between about nine and 12 years of age) could not be properly fitted and, thus, many were apparently jumping to older junior (or teenage) sizes. He persuaded manufacturers and store buyers to try a new intermediate range. Whatever the origin, styles for the subteen girl did not catch on quickly as retailers tended to group them with younger girls' clothing in promotions and merchandising rather than with that of older ones (*Earnshaw's Review*, June 1949: 135).

Middle-class teens' and preteens' increasing desires to look and act 'grown up' combined with retailers/buyers' ability to indulge these desires. Together, these tendencies helped to produce a measure of age ambiguity in girls' physical, public appearance styles. The junior high school market was awash in jewelry and purses. Lipstick and cosmetics for preteens came into increasing use and availability as Helen Pessel began merchandising her 'Little Lady' line for girls aged six to 14 in 1946. In 1952, it was joined by the children's toiletry company Tinkerbelle (Albert, 1967). Munsingwear and Teenform produced brassieres and girdles for young teens in the late 1940s (see *Earnshaw's Review*, March 1954: 95; see also Ewing, 1987) and began marketing the 'beginning bra' for preteens in the 1950s (*Earnshaw's Review*, January 1960: 115; Youman, 1956), seemingly nudging preteen girls into the 'young lady' euphemism frequently applied to them.

The 'subteen', as a commercial persona and age/size category, did not begin to be elaborated as a market worthy of much attention until the mid-1950s. Until this point in time, preteens had been overshadowed by the numerical prominence of 4 million new babies born each year, during the baby boom years, and by the cultural and commercial attention foisted upon teen girls. Early in 1955, a merchandise manager for a department store inquired of *Earnshaw's Review* trade readership: 'What Is the Retailer Doing for the Subteen?' She chastised retailers and buyers for ignoring the potential market of 'over four million Subteens this year and more coming in the next ten years' (Breen, 1955).

Her admonitions were less focussed on the potential market value of the subteen category than on calling attention to the need for a separate subteen department, an issue that involved the social identity of those occupying this new retail category: 'To expand the Subteen department, we may have to move *it* or other departments off of the children's floor. . . . The question then arises, where does the *Subteen Department* belong? On the children's floor or on the Teen Age . . . floor?' (Breen, 1955; emphases in original). The concern here centers on the ambiguity of the subteen girl's social identity: is she more of a child or a teen? From an adult parental viewpoint, this girl is most comfortably placed in social and spatial proximity with 'children' in terms of styling (i.e. with dresses that are less fitted, with cuts and designs that underemphasize the contours of girls' developing bodies). In the parlance of the day, it would be 'less sophisticated' (i.e. less sexual) than her older teenage sister's stylings.

The steady flow of millions of girls passing through the 10–13 age range each year proved difficult to ignore for retailers, managers and clothing buyers. Raising a question that continues to plague those involved with preteens today, a buyer³ for the Lyttons department store in Chicago asked how a subteen can be 'kept' (that is, as a customer) into her teen years and beyond. One response focussed on creating customer 'loyalty' in order to lengthen this short transitional phase. In order to create loyalty, however, the subteen – her personality, desires and needs – must be known:

The subteen girl is an entity unto herself. She has quite different problems in dress than her teen-age sister, or her younger sister who can wear the 7–14 styles. . . . She definitely has a more grown-up feeling than two or three years ago, when blue jeans . . . reigned supreme. (Reimann, 1955)

It would be a mistake, the writer continues, to advertise subteen merchandise with that intended for younger girls. Furthermore, sales personnel should treat the subteen girl 'as a young lady with a brain, not as someone we barely tolerate during adolescence, or as a forgotten member of society' (Reimann, 1955).

The buyer here is elaborating a commercial persona – in a sense, constructing a 'consumer self' – of the subteen girl, a construction that performs the cultural work of personifying a market relation by giving a face and personality to a market category. A hedge against the uncertainty of this particular market, the subteen's desires appear as a naturalized consequence of her femaleness and age.

Apparel trade discourse aside, the subteen classification was not

enthusiastically embraced in the early 1950s. The variations of physicality feed the ambiguity of social identity; girls can vary quite dramatically in size between the ages of 10 and 13. Some girls are tall and lanky whereas others are short; some have developed breasts while others have not. It is a sizing nightmare for manufacturers and a potential fitting disaster for retailers who must negotiate with these girls and their mothers on the sales floor. Frequent changes in style also make it difficult to stock and merchandise for this category when, in a year or so, many of the girls will have moved on to 'older' sizes and styles.⁴

Indeed, another part of the frustration and fascination with this apparel category is its trickledown ambiguity; after all, by definition, girls would enter the subteen or preteen age/size category with an anticipatory exit strategy hanging in the balance. Some girls wanted to move into teen-style clothing and pass over this diminutive category; they didn't want to be 'sub' or 'pre' anything. Further exacerbating the problem were reports by the 1950s that teenagers themselves were not happy with the term 'teen' and retailers quickly renamed their departments accordingly (for example, the Deb Shop, Jr Assembly Shop or Jr Prom Shop; see *Earnshaw's Review*, August 1956: 64; October 1959: 48; Marr, 1954; see also 'Modern Merchandising in Infants' and Children's Wear by Joseph Castaldi', *Stores*, January 1957: 40). We can see at work here Pierre Bourdieu's (1983) notion of 'distinction', functioning, in this case, as age rather than class distinction. Retailers and manufacturers were driven to innovate both 'older' clothing styles and 'older' identities while somehow maintaining the categorical integrity of subteen/preteen merchandise. Independence and maturity, as realized on the bodies of girls, served (and continue to serve) as a form of cultural capital; it can be a site for investment and conversion as well as a marker of cultural position.

It was the sheer numerical size of the target population, driven by the baby boom, that clinched subteens as a standard retail category by the late 1950s. A Carson's, Chicago merchandise manager in 1959 explained the subteen girl to the trade audience:

She spends as much as she can possibly beg, borrow or steal from her dazed parents. She loves to shop. All we need to do is expose this *Newteen* to the things she likes, and she is on our team – selling herself, her mother, and her pals. . . . Our customer needs a feeling of security, of close friendships with contemporaries. She idolizes the age group just above her and does not want to be confused with 'those infants,' who is anyone just a year

younger or a grade behind her. This makes her want a Subteen department, a corner of her own. (*Earnshaw's Review*, July 1959: 81; emphasis in original)

The subteen identity is an aspirational one. It is ever looking forward in pursuit of the autonomy of expression available to those just a year or two older, but, at the same time, this pursuit can be *purchased*, culturally and monetarily, in the present with the 'right' styles placed in the correct age/maturity ascension on the retail floor. (Note in the above quote the attempt to coin a new category, the 'newteen'.)

To whatever extent the actual or imputed desires of the subteen girl focussed on being 'older' in the 1950s, her relative immaturity was something to be acknowledged and accommodated by the adults who sought to cater for her. One retailer created an alcove with a bar and two stools 'to be used for subteen giggling as well as trying on clothes' (*Earnshaw's Review*, November 1957: 55). The anomaly between the sought after 'sophistication' of the subteen girl and her chronological and social age was not lost on retailers:

The salesperson should always remember their insecurity, shyness, their desire to be glamorous and independent of the rules; their urge to all look alike. The Fashion Board members [preteen consultants to the store] told me that they like 'The helpful kind of saleslady.' . . . One (complete with pink lipstick) said 'Someone older than we are who knows more about clothes.' (*Earnshaw's Review*, July 1956: 111)

Subteens required the approval of their peers and assistance by salespeople to perform their aspirational maturity (Schneider, 1958). Some stores, recognizing the subteens' lack of confidence, offered 'charm classes' to entice the girls and their mothers into the store (*Earnshaw's Review*, June 1958: 119; August 1959: 48–9).

Confusion ensued as the market position of the subteen increased. One buyer thought that using subteen 'lingo' would be a promising way to lure them into the store (*Earnshaw's Review*, August 1956: 64). Retailers were advised not long thereafter to refrain from using the subteens' slang because 'it is very profoundly theirs and these girls sometimes consider this "patronizing"' ('Retail Ads that Sell Subteens', *Earnshaw's Review*, November 1960: 72).

Subteen business produced sales that apparently made the hassle of dealing with this age group worthwhile. *Earnshaw's Review* reported on an

American Girl survey conducted in 1960 of 2.1 million girls of this age range – a range that had expanded to include 10–14 year olds by the late 1950s. It found that \$450m were spent by and on subteen girls for the 1959 Christmas season alone. Of that, \$5m went on cosmetics. A reported \$138.5 million worth of merchandise was received by subteens as gifts and \$7.152 million in gift cash ('How Subteen Dollars Are Spent for Christmas', *Earnshaw's Review*, September 1960: 86). Sales figures like these certainly caught retailers' eyes.⁵

MULTIPLE PERSONAE: FROM BARBIE TO BROOKE

Social critic Kay Hymowitz marks 1959 as the cultural moment 'when the media and the businesses it promoted dropped all pretense of concern about maintaining childhood' by flaunting 'the very freedom, consumer pleasure, and sex that parents had long been trying to delay' in children's lives (2000: 110). Mattel's Barbie doll was the culprit. It was Barbie, Hymowitz maintains, that 'began the media's teening of childhood' (2000: 110). Inspired by a Swiss plastic adult doll that was coupled with a new concept of multiple outfits that could be sold separately, Barbie has since been blamed for everything from girls' negative body images to materialism (see Rogers, 1999).

Recently, the daughter of Barbie's inventor Ruth Handler defended Barbie from these charges:

Barbie was just supposed to be a teenage girl or adult who had a nice figure. . . . It's all gotten way out of line. It angers me. It was really just meant to be children projecting themselves when they get older. Teenage situations, career things. It was very innocent. (Burton, 2002)

Inventor intent aside, Barbie became iconic of the 'teenage girl' in 'teenage situations'. Regardless of how serious or literal any single person took Barbie's figure, look and (life)style as definitive, the doll offered yet another prominent source of display imagery against which virtually every girl has had to position herself.

In September 1960, *Earnshaw's Review* started a new special section of the magazine entitled 'Subteen World', devoted to buyers and retailers of the subteen market. In the introductory statement of this section, the continuing ambiguity of this social-style-market category is not only evident, but also definitive of it:

The Subteen Girl. Who is she? She's a girl who walks into your store and boldly asks for an 'ultra-sophisticated' dress . . . and

blushes when her date compliments her. She's a girl who defiantly specifies her taste in clothes when she walks into your stores . . . and walks into a party with baited breath awaiting approval. Half-girl and half-woman, she's one of a total of 8,500,000 subteen girls in this country today. (September 1960: 63)

The tension between woman and girl prompted what was, by then, a predictable question: 'Are Subteen Dresses Becoming too Sophisticated?' Manufacturers of subteen dresses, noted the writer, were anxious to keep her in their lines 'past her time' and had begun making dresses more suited to a teen girl's figure and disposition (Paturis, 1961).

The industry briefly debated a new size (a 'g' size) to fill the 'gap' between subteen and teen styles. Yet, too much monetary and symbolic investment had already been sunk into the 'subteen' to start over and have to undergo a new educational campaign (*Earnshaw's Review*, March 1961: 28). The 'preteen dilemma' had become chronic and has not yet been resolved today. No one has quite figured out how to keep girls – in their ambiguous transition out of childhood during these preteen/tween years – from 'jumping' to the older (teen/junior) girls' departments and sections (see, for example, *Earnshaw's Review*, May 1979: 58; July 1986: 70).

In terms of age/style distinction, preteen styling was becoming blurred with that intended for teen girls. Age slippage was becoming more apparent. For example, a *Parents* magazine article by Flanders Dumbar in 1962 about 'teen dress' focussed on the *preteen* range of 12- and 13-year-old girls. The blurring between chronological and social maturity, as evident in the stylistic expressions of girls of these ages, became the subject for public moral concern at this time, as the *Life* (1962) magazine feature, discussed at the beginning of this article, was to make prominent. In another pronouncement of a time/space nexus of ambiguity and transition, a 'Subteen World' 1962 editorial (essentially an advertisement for White Stag's [a clothing brand] 'Changeabouts' line) highlights how 'she changes everyday . . . thank goodness!'. The company's solution was to offer a versatile clothing line made of sailcloth color and design, coordinated to allow for mixing and matching of various personae to a girl's content: from bird-watcher to track star to gourmet to juggler to entomologist. The transition from 'little girl to preteen' was a glorious one, the ad continued, tailored to 'a young girl's daydreams . . . or her fashion dreams' (*Earnshaw's Review*, May 1962: 2–3). Prefiguring the postmodern concepts of pastiche and bricolage, White Stag is featured as the brand that provides 'quality in quantity!'

The tween girl's march towards hyperfemininity and sophisticated sexualized looks halted, albeit briefly, with the popularization of casual clothing styles, such as t-shirts and jeans, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A 1973 *Earnshaw's Review* article revealed what appeared to be a phase shift in the attitude of young girls, reporting on a survey of 25 'preteen' girls, all of whom agreed with the statement: 'I would much rather wear pants or bell bottoms than a dress' (March 1973: 43). The article stressed how the preteen girl's taste mattered and that she was the consuming subject 'with . . . buying power', even when she shopped with her mother: 'It is the preteen girl who should be sold first, then her mother. While the girl dominates the fashion, the mother still has veto power, particularly when price is important' (1973: 44). Two years later, a market observer cautioned that preteen buying had been brought 'virtually to a halt' and that, in the current uncertain retail marketplace, 'liquidity is the chief goal'. Retailers were encouraged to invest in overalls and other basic items, but to recognize that 'fashion still counts. And there are some looks in the market that must be tried regardless of the economy' (*Earnshaw's Review*, January 1975: 42).

In the 1970s, feminists began to pay attention to 'girl culture' as a site for agency and creativity in addition to one of market manipulation. McRobbie and Garber (1997) called for more attention to preteen girls. The female 'teenybopper culture' (which included the fandom of male rock stars) that had emerged since the Second World War, they noted, was more commercially packaged as compared to (predominantly) masculine subcultures and was also distinct in important ways from little girls and teenage girls. Although preteen girls find themselves in 'a potentially awkward and anonymous space', they find ways to transform this space into a site of active feminine identity. Driven in part by teenyboppers' anxieties about moving into sexual interactions as teenagers, the cultural space they negotiate with commodities and images, in the safety of 'all-female friendship groups', may be interpreted as a way of 'buying time . . . from the real world of sexual encounters' (1997: 120).

Clothing industry observers in the 1970s feared that unisex or less sexually dimorphic silhouettes would spell the end to a lucrative market of specialized dresses and accessories. Trade advertisements pitted 'dresses' against 'jeans' in a showdown-at-the-OK-Corral narrative, decrying (more in hope than in actuality) the end of the 'tomboy' look. The industry response targeted preteen and teen girls with increasingly explicit and suggestive imagery. Just as Barbie marked a cultural commercial shift in the world of doll play, Brooke Shields in Calvin Klein jeans ads marked a cultural commercial shift in public cultural representations and discourses

about jeans and girls' bodies.⁶ Clad in tight-fitting jeans and a partially unbuttoned blouse, Shields famously revealed that 'Nothing comes between me and my Calvins'.

Form-fitting designer jeans sparked the flailing preteen market. An industry strategy attempted to erase the ambiguity of the preteen identity by anchoring age aspiration, femininity and quite explicit sexuality onto the bodies of young girls. One trade ad from 1981 for Wilkies Young Junior Rumble Seats captures the sentiment nicely. It depicts a leggy girl in tight Calvin Klein-like jeans with her head tilted and long hair flowing. She looks directly at the audience, one hand on her hip and the other by her side holding a rag doll, as if she is about to drop it onto the floor. The headline reads: '13 going on 18' (see Figure 1; see also *Earnshaw's Review*, April 1981: 66). She is about to discard the props of innocent childhood and move directly into a world of sexual availability. No longer shying away from the 'sophisticated dress' concern of previous decades, the industry now embraced and promoted the nubile preteen. It had realized that femininity – a sexualized femininity – for this age had exchange value. Explicit sexual tension and age ambiguity characterized the cultural space of young white heterosexual girlhood in the 1980s.

It was precisely at this time that social observers began to note and lament the 'loss of childhood' (see Lynott and Logue, 1993). David Elkind's *The Hurried Child: Growing up too Fast too Soon* (1981), Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), Valerie Suransky's *The Erosion of Childhood* (1982), Vance Packard's *Our Endangered Children* (1983) and Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* (1985) all noted, to varying degrees, the changing visual or sartorial *appearance* of children. Particularly salient was the extent to which children were looking increasingly 'like adults', echoing the observations of social historian Philippe Ariès (1962), who used images of children dressed in 'adult' clothing in 16th century France to conclude that children were once thought of as 'miniature adults'. The young 'knowing' girl comes to stand for lost innocence, a lost childhood (see Higonnet, 1998).

In 1986, Robinson's department store in Southern California successfully 'upgraded its merchandise mix and re-entered the trendy preteen market' (*Earnshaw's Review*, June 1986: 4). Echoing the basic tenets of the trickledown process, the senior vice president highlighted the importance of 'junior-inspired looks'. Building the pilot 'preteen' section around the label 'JWR Girlfriends – for the young junior', Robinson's featured Esprit apparel company's fashion-forward concepts. Specialty stores were also beginning to create spaces for preteens. In 1987, the owner of Kaleidoscope

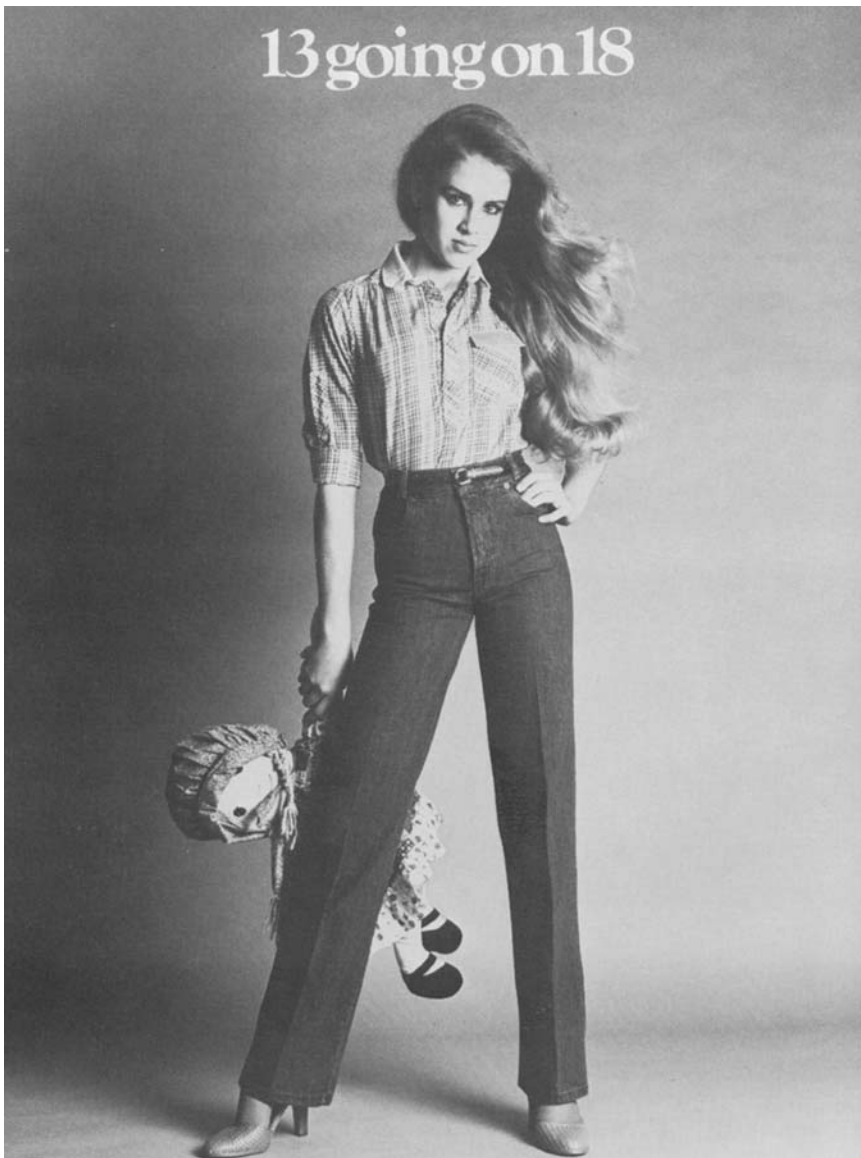


Figure 1: Explicit sexual tension and age ambiguity characterize the cultural space of young white heterosexual girlhood in the 1980s. This trade ad for Wilkies junior rumble seats plays on the Brooke Shields/Calvin Klein innuendo of a few years earlier. (*Earnshaw's Review*, April 1981: 66)

(a 2600-square foot store in Southern California) reiterated a problem plaguing retailers for decades – the difficulty involved in knowing and catering to preteens: ‘They’re not confident; they usually don’t know what they want. And they tend to clone each other . . . I want a special place for this age group that is left out everywhere else’ (*Earnshaw’s Review*, May 1987: 40). Kaleidoscope’s strategy revolved around size ranges that bridged seven to 14, preteen and a few junior sizes (‘just to fit the larger young girl’). They stocked accessories and hot labels, marketing them with innovative promotions in such a way that helped girls ‘feel that *this is their store*’ (1987: 40; emphases in original).

SEXUAL PERSONAE: ENTER THE TWEEN

The term Tween appears in a 1987 article in *Marketing and Media Decisions* to describe a *market* comprised of children aged nine to 15 that has ‘distinct characteristics and powers all its own’ (Hall, 1987: 56). As ‘youth’s middle tier’, the article underscores how Tweens are thought to increasingly wield influence over the family purse and thus impact upon brand decisions for themselves and their families. A 1992 article in *American Demographics* (Waldrop, 1992) takes up the Tween moniker to characterize children aged eight to 13 as ‘passionate about fads and fun, but many are also struggling with feelings of loneliness and fear’. That same year, the *Chicago Tribune* began a special weekly section of the newspaper entitled ‘Kid News’, specifically designed to target Tweens (aged nine to 13) and gain their readership with news and features about popular culture and kid culture that, according to *Editor and Publisher* magazine, has ‘limited appeal beyond the sixth grade lunchroom’ (Fitzgerald, 1992: 22).

In light of a general renewed interest in the ambiguous transition between childhood and teenhood, it is interesting to track the various ways in which analysts of consumer youth culture have or have not characterized this transition. James McNeal (1992), the grandfather of consumer research on children, makes no mention of Tweens in his book *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, nor are they identified in Guber and Berry’s (1993) *Marketing to and through Kids*. In contrast, the publication of Dan Acuff’s *What Kids Buy and Why* (1997), considered by many to be the ‘bible’ of children’s marketing, helped give the Tween – both boys and girls – a legitimacy beyond a contrived market category. Acuff grounds the Tween years (eight to 12) in biology and evolution, explaining how, at age six or seven, there is ‘a shift from right brain focus to left brain focus’, whereby children are no longer primarily fantasy-oriented and are fast developing logical reasoning skills

(1997: 83–4). The upper reaches of the age range are defined by a neural ‘housecleaning’, occurring around the age of 11 or so, whereby ‘unmyelinated neurons’ are literally swept away (1997: 85). The result, Acuff claims, is a need to ‘push away’ from childish occupations such as Power Rangers or Sesame Street. Thus, he argues that marketers should focus on ‘left brain winners’, for this group likes sports items and video games, mainly for boys, that provide challenge, competition, reward and stimulation (1997: 86–8); for girls, it was the old standby, Barbie, that could provide the material for emulation, aesthetics, collection and display (1997: 89–91).

Natural or not, by 1998, the Tween concept was well entrenched in marketing circles. The conservative McDonald’s Corporation launched its Big Kids meal for children aged seven and over, complete with its McWorld advertising campaign aimed directly at Tweens. By this point, specialized media directed at tweens began to crowd the field, including *Nickelodeon*, *Teen People* and *Sports Illustrated for Kids* magazines. Fashion magazines targeted directly at Tweens – pegged ‘baby glossies’ (Day, 2002) – soon followed. In 2000, *Vogue* began to experiment with test issues before launching *Teen Vogue* in the spring of 2003. *Cosmo Girl* and *Elle Girl* emerged in September 2001. The Tween had quickly become a definable, knowable commercial persona and a stage of youth. As one writer put it, Tweens ‘have designer-label tastes and the buying power to match. . . . They’re younger than teens, older than tots and known as “tweens.” Kids ages 8 to 12 – they used to be called preteens – are a market designers want to capture’ (Donnally, 1999). The Sara Lee Corporation, which is now in the undergarment business, repackaged its youthful underwear in more vibrant colors and designs when the eight to 12 years olds it consulted deemed their standard pink and blue packages ‘babyish’ (Ebenkamp, 1998). The venerable Fairchild publishers in New York got in on the act and began publishing a supplement, *Tween Business*, in the late 1990s to its *Children’s Business* monthly. Early issues of this supplement, aimed at retailers, raved about the trend towards the ‘downsizing’ of junior and adult apparel, as designer labels ranging from Ralph Lauren to Tommy Hilfiger introduced new lines (sizes seven to 16) with tweens in mind.

Unlike its subteen and preteen predecessors, the Tween does not present itself as a diminutive category or as a weigh station on the way to some other desirable status, but as an identity in itself. Yet, as an ongoing study of girls and boys of the tween and teen years by Kaiser and Chandler reveals, Tween is not a term that youth themselves tend to use (or even know). Interestingly, the industry does not tend to use the term directly in consumer

marketing; rather, it is a term that is used in industry discourse (for example, *Tween Business*, which markets manufacturers' goods to retailers) and popular discourse (for example, *Time*, *Newsweek*). The study by Kaiser and Chandler involves interviews with tweens and teens regarding issues of dressing in relation to age as it relates to the interplay among industry offerings, personal choices, media representations and family and peer influences.

In an interview in 2001, a 10-year-old girl put it like this: 'Sometimes I look older. Sometimes I look younger. Sometimes I look my age.'⁷ She described her own age group as 'preteen', which she defined as 10–12 years. Basically, these are the 'three years before you become an older person'. The visual distinctions she made to delineate age boundaries were as follows: younger girls covered themselves up on top; her own, preteen, age group was described as 'skimpier', including tops with spaghetti straps; older teen girls, she indicated, could wear tube tops with special bras, requiring no straps at all. In her view, though, what girls wore at these various ages should not be a big issue; after all, people 'shouldn't be looking there'.⁸

On the other hand, an older girl (aged 13) expressed some concern about young girls looking 'too sexy':

Everyone's wearing little skimpy clothes and stuff. . . . I think they're making younger kids look sexy, and I don't like that. They try to tie it in by putting like a Barbie thing on it, where an older person would have a brand name. . . . They're trying to make six-year-old girls look sexy. You know, it screams 'Abduction!' more.

An older girl (aged 15) framed the situation directly in terms of a trickle-down process: 'Younger kids imitate us, and we imitate college kids. . . . It gets tamer as you go down.'

Part of the impetus for producing and distributing what many would concur are sexually marked clothing styles can be found in the tension between trying to meet girls' ever-pressing demands for a sense of autonomy and personhood (i.e. encoded in looking 'older') and yet 'keeping' them in the Tween category and store. It is a business strategy for some who fight against the fear that their lines will no longer be 'cool'. The movement both towards and away from older looks encodes cultural ambivalence about girls' sexuality and simultaneously reinforces girls' bodies as the cultural site of display and sexualization.

The sexualization of children has become a concern in the public realm and has often been discussed in the context of children's dress. A 1993 *Newsweek* article described the outfit that one five year old wore to school:

Take the flirty ensemble the youthful New Yorker angled off to school in last week. In low-slung, torso-tight bell-bottoms topped with a frothy white 'poet' blouse from her favorite boutique, 'Little Leepers,' Olivia sashayed with the poise of any nubile Lolita bound for the discotheque – except she's about a third the size. (26 April 1993: 59)

Citing 'seductive' clothing and adult-cut bikinis, the author insinuated that mothers were not paying careful attention to the 'miniature versions of tarty adult togs' that the children's wear industry was offering. This is a form of trickledown fashion that Veblen or Simmel could never have imagined.

The sexualization of young girls has also extended to the fetishizing of their clothing and, in so doing, combines commodity and sexual fetishism. In 1990, a *Redbook* article argued that 'hip' may not be *safe*, citing the example of a fourth-grade girl who won first prize at a birthday party for the sexiest performance as the song blared: 'I want your sex, I want your body!' The article was careful to note that her dress consisted of gold lamé pants with a designer blazer and dangling earrings while she danced to the throbbing beat (Olds and Papalia, 1990: 91, 98).

Moving in the opposite age trajectory of influence (a trickle-up process), in the mid-1990s, young girls' clothing styles like baby doll dresses, pleated schoolgirl skirts, Mary Jane shoes and ankle socks have gained popularity as *adult* women's wear. These scaled-up versions of children's wear were denounced by some observers as 'pedophilic fashion' (*New York Times*, 27 March 1994, Sec. 9: 8) and described as 'fun' by others (*Newsweek*, 20 June 1994: 75). Young teen girls now work as professional models for adult clothing ads (Egan, 1996), adding to the age/personhood blurring found increasingly in publicly circulated images of children. The simultaneous age trajectories of trickledown and trickle-up processes suggest the need for a complex analysis of age boundaries that are undergoing major reconstruction. Although the focus of our analysis in this article is on the trickledown side of the equation, we recognize the need for further attention to the renegotiation of age as an identity variable per se.

For the most part, however, cultural anxieties have revolved around what is regarded as the premature sexualization of young girls' bodies. In 1995, a Calvin Klein ad campaign featuring scantily clad young people attracted accusations of 'kiddie porn' (Tucker, 1998). In 1999, Klein cancelled a new ad campaign that elicited a similar response. He had featured children in underwear on a billboard in Times Square in Manhattan. In reaction to the cries of conservative groups, psychologists

and others, a *New York Times* editorial opined that wearing underwear was not the most important issue that American children were facing: 'Foreign children may beat the pants off ours in math, but don't worry. In Times Square, at least, you won't see American kids in their underwear' (Akst, 1999).

In general, anxiety about girls' sexuality has become rampant in wider cultural discourse. Recent articles in publications ranging from the *New York Times* (Jarrell, 2000) to the *Ladies Home Journal* (Cool, 2001) describe how youth are engaging in 'body-part sex' (usually girls giving oral sex to boys) at an early (i.e. preteen) age. Moreover, girls are characterized as initiating romantic and sexual activity (Kuczynski, 2002). The problem is often attributed to negative body image and self-esteem, seen as stemming from the visibility of skinny fashion models and media stars (Condor, 1996).

By 2000, many retailers, designers and manufacturers were responding to the cultural anxiety about girls' premature sexualization by distancing themselves (in their verbal discourse, at least) from the Lolita look. Part of the complexity surrounding this issue revolves around the ambiguity of the age/size range characterizing the Tween, and each manufacturer or retailer develops a strategy to capitalize on this ambiguity.

Limited Too (the tween version of clothing retailers the Limited) takes the credit for 'inventing' the tween specialty store in 1996. Its target market is characterized as eight to 14 'or really, 8 to 12' (Azoulay, 2001: 9). These are girls who are 'fickle, energetic, fashion aware . . . and not yet jaded', who move 'from role playing to reality' and crave 'fun, sensory stimulation, and affiliation'. Limited Too is a self-described aspirational brand that distances itself from the Lolita-like fashion trends: 'We're not Abercrombie. We don't take those risks' (referring to the trickledown version or abercrombie with a little 'a', whose 'risks' have included clothing styles such as the widely publicized thong underwear for girls as young as seven years, with slogans such as 'eye candy' printed on it). Similarly, the Zutopia brand (a tween version of Wet Seal) offers tween styles for girls who want 'to look like a teenager without being provocative. . . . Take that provocative twist out and you've got the looks. She's more mature than she was two or three years ago', says the CEO of Zutopia (2001: 11).⁹

Overall, the goal of tween departments or specialty stores is often to create a 'fashion-filled, accessory-filled alternative' (2001: 11) to department stores or junior specialty stores. Once the space is created, however, it is still hard to define who the customer will be. She might be a mature six-year-old girl or a very petite 30-year-old woman.¹⁰

Despite the ever-blurring boundaries between a separate Tween-ness

and young womanhood, industry discourse continues – indeed, intensifies – its goal of constituting a distinct cultural commercial space for Tweens. A 2001 issue of *California Apparel News* hails Tweens as one of the fastest growing demographic groups and ‘the new fashion leaders of the youth market’ (Nieder and Figueroa, 2001). As a California trend forecaster projects: ‘Where teens were really the trend setters at one point, now it’s the Tweens.’ This market includes a subset 2.7 million strong that spends more than \$14 billion annually on clothing and, although the traditional boundaries of the market have been defined as seven to 14, this trend forecaster’s research indicates that children as young as six have specific style preferences. She cautions that it is important to research the Tween market carefully and to keep it separate from teen lines. She describes tween styles as changing more rapidly than teen styles, so it is very important for retailers to be in tune with media and social influences on tweens. In her view, highlighting the ‘stars of the moment’ (such as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera) and making shopping an event (‘It can’t just be clothes’) are the keys to success (Nieder and Figueroa, 2001).

SEXUAL ANXIETY, ANTICIPATORY ENCULTURATION AND THE MARKET

The *Look for Less* show on the Style cable network frequently advises young adult women to go to the girls’ department for t-shirts or other items that may fit both the body (snugly) and the budget. Specialty stores focussing on school uniforms are also fair game. A show on 31 December 2002 described how separates from school uniforms can be combined with a leather jacket or sexy boots for a not-for-the-classroom look. The spring 2001 issue of *Teen Vogue*, widely read by preteens, took a different approach, advising its young readers to mix and match carefully so as to avoid looking too ‘slutty’:

Don’t get us wrong: We’re not suggesting that you limit your wardrobe to twinsets and school kilts (although plaid is in this year); but getting it right is all about striking a balance. . . . Go ahead and embrace this season’s miniskirt trend, but wear your micro with preppy loafers, a funky jacket, or even knee-high boots . . . not a pair of stiletto sandals and a cropped halter. (‘Not that Innocent’, *Teen Vogue*, 2001: 108)

The complexity associated with style negotiation and sexual identity for young girls revealed here is astounding. Whether any particular tween girl embraces it, retreats from it or wavers somewhere in between, overt sexuality is a mode of self-presentation against (or within) which every female has to position herself.

The earlier invocation by an interviewee in the Kaiser and Chandler study about how certain clothes 'scream abduction' speaks to a particularly contemporary sexual awareness on the part of young girls who, it seems, unavoidably come to know themselves, in part, as objects of the sexual gaze and, thus, as targets of sexual predation (see also Chin, 2001). The market and market actors (advertisers, retailers, buyers, merchandisers) are indispensable to the enculturation of young girls into anticipated expected sexual personae. Accordingly, and somewhat ambiguously, girls exhibit agency as well in their appropriations of available styles and cultural models of girlhood. These afford a rich arena for them to experiment not only with age and gender identities, but also with how these overlap and intersect in complicated ways with sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class. Ambiguous age identity boundaries for young girls, as found in their clothing, popular cultural icons and overall media representations, create a cultural space for their ensuing incessant sexualization, regardless of whether emphasizing sexuality is an intended outcome. Uncertainty and a degree of danger and concern accompany the fashions as they trickle downwards.

What remains unresolved in the history of this age range for girls is the ambivalence and anxiety regarding sexual innocence and agency. The subteen, preteen and contemporary Tween seem to encode anticipatory statuses and identities to be acted out in the present, all the while preparing the ground for entry into a particular articulation of heterosexual female culture. They represent a coupling of everyday anxieties and pleasures with cultural discourses that blur age boundaries while also (strategically and commercially) aiming to define them. The extension of sizes upwards and downwards for girls of this age simultaneously allows for a broader range of sizes in 'cool' styles as well as the expression of an ambiguous, seemingly perpetual, state of inbetweenness. The very ambiguity of the age and person, coupled with the moral turpitude that always accompanies female sexuality, make for cultural volatility. In this way, middle girlhood has increasingly become a favored political site for the understanding of femininity, for discourses about vulnerability and 'lost childhoods' and for locating some of the evils of the consumer marketplace.

The figure of the Tween girl and her predecessors are inseparable from their inception in, and articulation with, the market exigencies of childhood. These commercially constructed market personae represent sites where gender, sexuality and commercial relations intersect to renaturalize and remoralize this age-circumscribed demarcation of middle childhood. The case of the tween girl underscores, more generally, how social persons,

cultural positions and consumption cannot be conceptualized as separate entities that occasionally come into contact with and influence each other; rather, they mutually constitute each other in multiple ways.

Notes

1. The proceedings from a 2002 apparel industry conference on Tweens and teens (*Fairchild Teens and Tweens Conference White Paper*, 2002) note that, by 2010, the US will have more teens than ever before in history (up 20 percent from 1995). The number of Tweens ('the kids on the brink of their teenage years') is projected to increase by 33 percent from 2000–05. More apropos than age per se, however, are the concepts of 'age aspiration' (the age one wants to be) and 'age gap' (the difference between real and aspirational age). A national survey among 12–19 year olds reveals that the 'age gap' narrows from five years to one year across this age span; that is, 12 year olds aspire to be/look 17 (a five-year gap) whereas the age gap has narrowed to only one year among 19 year olds.
2. From the late 1920s to the early 1940s, various clothing size ranges were developed, particularly for girls. These essentially divided girlhood into finely graded transitions between clothing categories (see Cook, 2004).
3. A buyer, not to be confused with a customer, scours various manufacturers' lines of clothes to purchase for a store or client.
4. See *Earnshaw's Review* (May 1949: 136ff.; April 1953: 134; 'More Subteen Space Holds them Longer', March 1956: 54, 79).
5. Unsure as to how the study was conducted, we cannot comment on the generalizability of its findings.
6. Calvin Klein is also credited with sexualizing men's bodies. Appropriating some of the imagery associated with gay male culture from the 1970s, he (and his photographer Bruce Weber) packaged images of men in underwear, contributing to a trend towards sexual objectification at the end of the 20th century.
7. This and the following interview are part of a larger study of tween and teen subjectivities in relation to style.
8. There is something of a contradiction with respect to the whole bra strap issue. From an adult perspective, it is hard not to notice a 'straying' bra strap. As it becomes fashionable to coordinate bra straps with tanktops or spaghetti straps, the overall look on a girl's body becomes simultaneously 'comfortable and feminine, in-your-face cute and alluring' (Zamichow, 1999).
9. Russell and Tyler (2004) refer to these spaces as transitional for the tween who self-consciously realizes that she will occupy them for a limited period of her life.
10. This is not a new theme. The author of a 1973 *Earnshaw's Review* article speculated that a 'preteen' consumer may be:

an oversized eight-year-old or a thirty-year-old junior, who is still small enough to fit into preteen clothes and appreciates the lower preteen pricing . . . [but mostly] the preteen customer is an eleven to fourteen-year-old girl, who knows she is no longer a child nor quite yet a junior-miss. We doubt that she can be easily classified. (March 1973: 42)

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