

# Childhood and the driving force of fashion

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Are children as young as five years old so driven by consumerism and fashion that they are in danger of 'losing' their childhood?

Not necessarily, according to Dr Jane Pilcher, a [sociologist](#) at the University of Leicester, whose [research findings](#) on children and fashion were recently reported in the international journal, *Childhood*.

Nonetheless, her findings showed that brands and logos are highly important to some children, influenced by family attitudes, peer pressure and celebrity culture.

The desire for certain brands and logos, especially in boys' sportswear, is something the UK has seen graphically played out in the recent riots and looting, sometimes carried out by young children.

Dr Pilcher's research, which pre-dates the riots, was unusual in studying the influence of fashion on youngsters between the ages of five and twelve years. It was co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the 5 year 'Cultures of Consumption' research programme.

Following the government-backed Bailey report, which came out in June this year, concerns had been expressed that young children were becoming more like teenagers in their behaviour and the ways they use fashion to create their identity.

While Dr Pilcher agrees there are [worries](#) surrounding children and

fashion, she believes it would be unrealistic to expect the nature of childhood to stay the same when society itself is changing and becoming dominated by consumerism and the celebrity culture.

However, she believes that [youngsters](#) do remain children in many ways and are saved from turning prematurely into [teenagers](#) because of the greater controls and intervention exercised by their parents.

She argued: "I would emphasize that we should be looking at what parents buy for their children and the [negotiations](#) that take place round that [consumption](#).

"Parents might give in and buy something they don't necessarily approve of but they can place quite heavy restrictions as to where that item of clothing can be worn.

"For instance, the child might only be allowed to wear a glittery off-the-shoulder top in the safe, monitored environment of the school disco and not anywhere else."

Dr Pilcher's study, conducted with colleagues at the University of Leicester, found that even very young children have a great deal of knowledge about the clothing retail sector and they know exactly which shops will sell the kind of clothing they want.

She also found a strong association between family culture and the value children placed on brands and logos, citing two cases, 'Robert' and 'Hayley' (not their real names).

Robert came from a family where brands and designer fashions were valued, and he 'name-dropped' constantly about the brands of his clothes. Hayley, on the other hand, came from a family with little disposable income, where brands and logos were of so little importance that she had

difficulty in understanding what the terms meant.

Parents, however, do not have it all their own way. Dr Pilcher commented: "There are a variety of fashion influences on children and you can't ignore the pressures from their peer groups, especially friends of the same sex, and their ideas of what is cool."

A further influence on young children is the celebrity culture, which they may wish to copy or they may reject. The skimpy clothing of singers Beyoncé and Kylie were not always admired by girls, who thought it was rude to show so much bare skin.

Is the dependence of [young children](#) on fashion a bad thing? Not necessarily, it seems. The acquisition of brands that are in vogue and therefore cool can give great pleasure and act as a bonding between peers in a group. For young people themselves, it is a matter of image rather than money.

Although consumer culture clearly has financial implications, many of the brands favoured by young people are available in high street stores very cheaply.

Children who do not participate in that culture, however, can be isolated from their peers in a form of social exclusion. This, Dr Pilcher says, is something to be borne in mind by teachers when considering school uniform policies and by parents doing battle with their children on the shop floor.

While the recent UK riots have been presented as an extreme form of consumerism, Dr Pilcher believes it is having a negative effect on the [brand](#) images targeted by rioters.

"The makers of those brands are now concerned because there is a

damaging association in the public mind between the rioters and looters and their interest in those brands," she said.

"What the disturbances have shown is that if the rioters are the type of people who want these brands and they are prepared to smash a window to get them, then perhaps the brands have become tainted."

Provided by University of Leicester

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