

Durable or cheap? Parents' acquisition of children's clothing

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Keywords: Children's clothing; Longevity; Quality; Consumption.

Abstract: Parents are faced with a plurality of choices and concerns when it comes to the acquisition of clothing for their children. This paper explores how parents employ longevity in consumption of children's clothing from a practice-oriented perspective. The material consists of 6 focus groups with 40 parents who have at least one child under the age of 18. The aim of the groups was to establish children's clothing needs: how many they need of each garment, how long parents expect the garment to last and what they understand as quality in clothing.

The analysis shows that parents mainly opt for an 'one or the other' strategy; they choose what they understand as quality, often affiliated with specific brands, and accept paying more for the garment, or they mainly choose based on low prices, and expect less of the garment. Quality is evaluated based on the garments' durability and function. More specifically, the parents measure the service lifetime of a garment based on the number of seasons it lasts, either in terms of wear and tear or the child growing out of it. The expected lifetime is defined by uncertain sources, from their own and friends' experiences, and their desire to justify their own choices as well as routinised practices. Our discussion section employs these findings and contextualise them within product lifetime discourses. By doing this, we provide knowledge about how quality is understood, and how brand and price are used as indicators. We show how lack of information about products, especially on garments, leads to uninformed consumption practices that have consequences for how quality and longevity are prioritised and understood.

Introduction

In studies of clothing consumption, it is often taken for granted that the person who acquires and owns the clothes is also the user, but this is not always the case (Klepp & Laitala, 2018). Parents acquire clothes for their children, and are faced with a plurality of choices and concerns (Rose, 2013). Based on focus group interviews with parents in Norway, this paper explores how parents deal with consumption of children's clothing, and how they employ longevity in buying clothing for their children. We provide knowledge about how quality is understood and how brand and price inform the practice of acquisition. We argue that lack of information about products, especially on garments, leads to uninformed consumption practices that have consequences for how quality and longevity are prioritised and understood. Even though we have studied parents and children's clothing from a Norwegian perspective, our findings also have relevance for other countries and for other types of clothing consumption.

Children's clothing

The playful child is a persistent part in the idea of childhood and has been important for the development of children's clothes. This line of thought originates from Rousseau's (1762/2010) philosophy of children and education. The significance for children's clothing is well described by Berggren Torell (2007) and studies by Corrigan (1989, 2008) on family clothing consumption include a perspective on ownership. In these studies, childhood is considered as a time with independent value. In line with this, children have their own types of clothing that allow them to play.

There has been lacking attention to children and parents in studies of consumption, as noted by Cook (2008) and Martens, Southerton, and Scott (2004). Much of the research on clothing, including clothing for children and young people, is focused on the different styles and fashions and the idea of a close connection between clothing and identity (Crewe & Collins, 2006). A study by Chen, Au, and Li (2004) on Chinese parents and children's clothing found

that quality and style were important features of purchasing, while functionality, durability, price and brand were less important. A study from Turkey revealed other important factors such as size of garment, price, quality, easy trade and payment options (Köksal, 2007). Some studies apply consumption theory to investigate how parents as consumers have a very specific role regarding their children's consumption (Klepp, Laitala, & Skuland, 2019; Storm-Mathisen, 2008). Thus, children's influence on household consumption is an important part of how consumption practices should be approached.

Dressing children in a Nordic climate

Both youth fashion and the playful child are international ideas, but we also have clothing standards that characterise Norwegian clothing practices. An important idea is to be able to dress for outdoor activities, often summarized as "there is no bad weather, only bad clothes" (Hebrok, Klepp, & Turney, 2016). Clothing consumption for Norwegian children is especially characterized by clothing for the outdoors and for activities demanding functional and practical clothing. Children are outdoors regardless of weather and season, and the Nordic climate with its varying weather during all four seasons, demands clothing that can protect the child from being cold and wet and that enables movement. Kindergartens and schools have certain demands for clothes, both the ability to stay dry and warm and the amount of clothes (Klepp et al., 2019). Purchasing children's clothing, such as winter overalls and outdoor jackets, is expensive and can therefore be seen as a risk to the household economy if the garment is worn out faster than the child grows out of it (Klepp et al., 2019; Rutanen, Raittila, & Vuorisalo, 2019). Thus, longevity is an important consideration for some of the Norwegian parents. If a child lacks the necessary clothing, the parents themselves can be judged for poor parenting skills. As such, children's clothing can be viewed as an exhibition of the parents' competence and care (Brusdal, 2007).

Method

The material consists of 6 focus group interviews with 40 parents who had at least one child aged from 0 to 17 years. The interviews were conducted during December 2019 and February 2020 as part of the Norwegian Reference Budget for Consumer Expenditures

(Austgulen & Borgeraas, 2018). In December 2019, groups 1 to 4 discussed the number of clothes and shoes related to specific occasions, such as clothing for indoors, outdoors, festivities and underwear. Based on this material, the authors developed a list of garments and expected use phase, and these lists were presented to groups 5 and 6 in February 2020 for quality check. A criterion for participating, in addition to being a parent, was that the informants had the main responsibility for their child's clothing consumption or shared the responsibility 50/50 with a partner. In sum, the informants had 74 children and 27 informants had two or more children with a majority of boys. Each group represented parents with different income, housing, age and cultural background. The informants were asked to imagine what children need based on an ordinary level of consumption. This level should reflect that children have the clothes they need to be socially active for sport and leisure activities, and different social and festive occasions, throughout all seasons of the year. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For this paper, they were analysed through thematic content analysis, where we looked for descriptions of how many children need of each garment, how long parents expect the garment to last and what the parents understand as quality in clothing.

Results

The analysis shows that parents mainly opt for 'one or the other' of two competing strategies. One is buying what they understand as quality. The other is to buy cheap. The strategies are associated with different types of garments and materials, which are affiliated with brands, prices, and expectation to the garment.

Strategy	Garment	Material	Who decides	Shops	Priority/emphasis
Quality	Park suits, waterproof gloves, winter jackets/trousers, winter shoes and boots Warm inner layers (wool thermos)	Wind and waterproof Synthetic materials Wool	Demands from kindergarten and school + parents	Specialty stores and sports shops	Price Brand Lifetime
Cheap	Underwear summer clothes, casual indoor clothing	Cotton and cotton/polyester blends	The child + parents	Chain stores	Colors, style, themes (e.g. princesses), quantity (change + variety)

Figure 1. Strategies during acquisition.

In the following, we will concentrate on «quality». What is quality, how is it recognized and what is the relationship between quality, price, brand and longevity. As noted in Figure 1, there are certain types of garments that are often selected based on this strategy.

Indications of quality

Longevity

To "feel" that something has quality is an expression several of the informants use about garments. On questions such as "how long does this garment usually last?", the informants reply that it depends on the quality and the brand of the garment. Thus, it appears that the quality is actually longevity.

Quality is evaluated based on the durability of the garment, that is, how many winters it will last. If the child is too big for the garment before its end of use, it may be considered as quality. However, quality can also be related to price if a cheap garment turns out to last longer than the informant expected. As previous studies show (Klepp 2020), the lifespan of clothing can be measured in three ways: the number of times used, the number of years or the number of users. For parents, the last two methods are most relevant. They explain that durability for winter clothes means at least one or perhaps two seasons, but also that the child can grow out of the garment, which means they do not have to buy a replacement because of wear and tear, but because of size. For particularly expensive garments, the parents are also concerned with that clothes can be inherited between siblings, thus two users.

The parents expect that expensive clothing and clothes from specific brands have high quality. However, one informant experienced that a garment from a brand known for good quality had a short lifespan, which was then blamed on the child's ruthlessness during outdoor playing. If the theory does not play out, they are thus prepared with an ad hoc hypothesis, that it is the child who is special, and the impression (of the well-known brand with a higher price) can be maintained. Some parents are sceptical of this way of understanding quality and mention that the logo of the brand can generate an additional cost and thus that higher prices do not only mean better quality. The problem with using one's own experiences is, as two of the informants pointed out, that the child's way of playing can affect the durability of the garments. If the child plays unruly and abnormally, they can tear on the garment despite its good quality. As quality cannot be manifested in solid proof, it is expressed by the informants as a feeling.

Social, material and cultural

As mentioned, parents buy on behalf of their children. The system with kindergarten from an early age, long school days and a lot of outdoor time in a harsh climate, means that the parents' care and concern for their children is highly directed towards them being warm, dry and thus "safe". Consumption of clothing can thus be understood as an act of love in line with Miller (1998), because it is manifested and reproduced in social actions towards other people. This also relates to the fear of being perceived as a bad parent because a child is lacking the right type of clothing. This fear is more common among immigrants and parents struggling to make ends meet, as it requires capital in the form of competence and money to dress children in "quality clothes" (Klepp et al., 2019).

There are no labelling schemes that indicate the quality or expected lifetime of clothing and the only compulsory information is fibre labelling. In lack of factual information, the parents rely more on their social network, online user reviews and personal experience. Thus, the perception of quality depends on a range of practices that are accompanied by different types of clothing, which is also decisive for the motivation to choose durable products. The expected lifetime is defined by uncertain sources, from their own and friends' experiences, and their desire to justify their own choices as well as routinised practices

As we have seen, the parents want to prioritize quality for some clothes. Choosing quality is often based on experiences with brands, where there is high trust in brands the informants are familiar with. When evaluating these brands, the most common strategy is also the simplest, expensive clothes are expected to last longer and they choose the more expensive option. At the same time, we know from comparative tests that more expensive is not always better. One bad experience with a brand can be enough for the informants to never buy from that brand again, despite the fact that comparative tests show that the quality within one brand can vary a lot.

Discussion

Environmental implications

In the material, there is a lack of environmental discussions, which may seem strange.

However, eco-labelling on clothing is unusual in the Norwegian market. It is possible that the focus groups' intentions and emphasis on an ordinary consumption level has impacted this. Still, we argue that environmental concerns are not part of the parents' priorities as it is more pressing to provide good clothes for the child. Furthermore, as this task is complex due to the lack of information available, taking into account other considerations is not perceived as possible. The same is shown by a previous study where the environment is set up as one of several alternatives for what is emphasized when buying children's clothes (Roos et al., 2020). Thus, by simplifying acquisition, and making the practice of acquisition more informed, it is possible that other concerns such as environmental ones can be taken into consideration.

Uninformed consumer practices

The perception of quality depends on a range of practices that are accompanied with different types of clothing, which are also decisive for the motivation to choose durable products. Longer lifespan for the clothes is a very effective environmental strategy, and even if the parents want longevity for economic reasons, the effect can still be significant for the environmental impact. The problem is that the criteria parents use to find garments with the potential for longevity are uncertain and give much influence to marketing strategies such as brand building combined with price. The lack of information about garments, leads to uninformed consumption practices that have consequences for how quality and longevity is prioritised and understood. The parents' desire to appear as competent consumers and good parents gives more power to the little information there is, such as price and brand. If expensive clothes from well-known brands break quickly, it is obvious to blame the active playful child. Some children obviously wear out many clothes, but this is also the 'right way' to be a child in Norway. Thus, a win-win situation arises. The parents have not been deceived, the child is physically active and the marketing strategy is not seen through.

Children's clothing in other countries

Consumption of children's clothing is determined in an interplay between claims, children, market and regulation in the form of, for example, school uniforms and requirements for activities in kindergarten and school. A larger study of the lifespan of children's clothing

could systematically compare countries with different conditions between these actors. Our analysis shows that how longevity is understood and recognized is not the same for all clothing. It will be important to understand how more clothing can be procured with priority given to longevity. To do so, a first step is to include several users as an important strategy for children's clothing. Inheritance, for example, is an important issue which we have not been able to discuss in this paper.

Conclusions

Parents emphasise either low price or "quality" when buying clothes. Environmental concerns are not important when buying children's clothes, and longevity is understood as a question of finances. Quality is not important for all types of garments, but for outerwear, winter clothing and water and windproof clothing as well as shoes. Low price is emphasized for underwear, summer clothes, cotton clothes, t-shirts and tops. Quality is understood as clothing with good usability and technical durability and is recognized through high prices and well-known brands.

Material, social and cultural aspects are important for how quality and longevity are employed. The expected lifetime is defined by uncertain sources, from their own and friends' experiences, and their desire to justify their own choices as well as routinised practices. The way quality is recognized by parents gives great power to market forces, and consumption practices are characterised as uninformed. If the lifespan of children's clothing is to increase, the parents' opportunity to choose clothes that will last longer must be easier, and the concept of quality must be developed and concretized. An important environmental strategy to stop the growth in the number of new clothes produced, is to ensure that each garment is used longer. Children, and especially young children, grow fast. Therefore, children's clothing are a type of clothing where more users are often needed to ensure that the clothes wear out.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful of the support from the Ministry of Children and Families through funding of the Norwegian Reference Budget for Consumer Expenditures, as well as SIFO/OsloMet.

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