

**CAND.MERC / MASTER OF SCIENCE**

**Department of marketing**

**Master's thesis:  
PEERS' INTERACTION AND BRAND CONSUMPTION.  
An empirical analysis of Italian tween girls.**

**Supervisor: Prof. Birgitte Tufte**

**Student: Sara Pavesi**

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*To my parents, Angela and Camillo,  
and to my sister Alessandra*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this work is to explore brand consumption of Italian tween girls and how the interaction and the influences of their peers can have an impact on the final choice and use of their brands. The choice of the target is due to tweens' high spending power and competence on brands. To study the symbolic meaning of brands in tweens' lives, the work focused on fashion and technology brands and used purely qualitative methods, based on five focus groups. Tween girls, at middle school, use their brands to state their image and personality in the new social contest they live. In particular they are concerned in appearing cool with peers and especially with boys, and they deny their closeness to childhood refusing kids brands and affirming their independence from parents. Tweens often draw inferences on other people on the basis of their brands' possession and they strictly interact with their friends to have confirmation of making the right choices and raise their self-confidence. Understanding the social impact of branding and the real needs moving tween girls is fundamental to better address this peculiar market segment. Therefore, this work ends with some suggestions for managers and retailers that could be taken into account to make their marketing strategies more effective.

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## Introduction

In later years, focus on children as consumers has been intensified both from a research perspective as well as from a social and business perspective (Martensen, 2007; Neely, 2005).

Family patterns have changed and children are given a role as consumers at an even earlier age; they have their own money and they influence decisions concerning household purchases (Siegel, Coffey and Livingston, 2001). For these reasons, companies and advertisers' interest towards this segment is increasing, and new and more sophisticated methods are being developed in order to reach them (Tuftte, 2005).

Nowadays, tweenagers have become the target group in focus, while in the last decades the interest was more focused on teenagers. Tweens, who derive their name from their being a group "in-between", that is, between being a child and a teenager, are described as the richest and most influential generation in history (Lindstrom, 2004). Tweens are very brand competent and gaining them as consumers is vital to companies, since it is likely they will trust their brands also when they are adults (Smallshaw, 2001).

Thus, considering the relevance of tweens, this work focuses on this consumer segment, in particular on the "older transitioning tweens", according to the classification given by Siegel *et al.* (2001). The work focalizes on the Italian contest, where this group coincides with young people attending middle school, and in particular it focuses on girls. In Italy there are 1.730.031 pupils attending middle school (Istat, 2007) and the 47.8% are girls.

Since the tweens' world is very complex as well their relationship with peers, this work wants to contribute to the existent literature by giving a further insight into brand consumption of Italian tween girls, taking into account the relevant influences exerted by their peers. This can be useful for marketers who need a deep understanding of the behaviours and needs of their target markets to better address them.

In particular, the objectives of this work are: to understand if and how tweens' relationship with brands has changed compared to their childhood; to understand which image of themselves tween girls want to offer to other people through the use of their

brands; to verify if tweens choose friends and groups of belonging in accordance to their attitudes towards brands; to specify interactions and influence of peers, both direct and indirect.

For the purpose of this work, two specific categories of products have been chosen: fashion apparels and technology products. The reasons for this choice are following. First of all, this group is highly fashion-sensitive and have a great interest for brands (Grant and Stephen, 2005) and they are very concerned with portable technologies, in particular mobile phones (Martensen, 2007). Moreover, both these categories consist of publicly consumed items, for which the peer influence is recognized to be more important (Bachmann, John and Rao, 1993; Bearden and Etzel, 1982).

This paper begins with a presentation of the theoretical framework in which the subject can be studied, presenting the contribution provided by literature to understand this phenomenon. In the first chapter, an overview of the children market with a focus on the tween market is provided. Moreover, since the phenomenon of tweens' choices of brands and the influences and interaction among peers can be studied in the context of three different areas of research, these are presented in the three following chapters.

First of all, the phenomenon can be studied in the context of consumer socialisation. Consumer socialisation is defined as "processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p.2).

Tweens are living the "reflective stage" where individuals become more aware of other people's perspectives and next to the need of shaping their own identity, they need to conform to group expectation (John, 1999). From the consumer socialisation perspective, peers are one of the socialisation agents along with parents and television (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). Peers can play a significant role in shaping tweens' consumer behaviour and group dynamics impact on their purchasing decisions. This work focuses on peers since, according to Ward (1974), parental influences decrease while peer influences increase with age. In addition, it is important to consider the

different influences on children distinctly, to ensure that marketing actions aimed at them are more effective (Foxall and Goldsmith,1995).

Secondly, since peers are considered as a reference group, the two major research streams of reference groups' influence on consumer product and brand choice are presented. These are "informal group" studies and "perceived influence" studies. Moreover, since the above mentioned studies are about positive reference group, the chapter ends with an overview on dissociative reference groups. Individuals wish to avoid being associated with this kind of reference groups and they "disidentify" with them (Englis and Solomon, 1995).

This first part ends with a review of the existent literature on brand symbolism.

In particular, previous researches show that children and tweens use brands as an instrument to communicate a message to their peer group and to possess the right brands can become of primary importance to them (Harper, Dewar and Diack, 2003). Brands can become fundamental to children for their symbolic function rather than for the functional benefits that are provided (Roper and Shah, 2007).

The second part of this paper presents the study in detail. First of all, an overview on the methodology used to carry the analysis is provided. Precisely, the study utilizes purely qualitative methods, based on five focus groups, to explore the phenomenon from the perspective of these young girls, in order to gain a richer and deeper understanding of their behaviours. Since this was a small convenience sample it was not appropriate to apply statistical techniques to the results which have been analyzed according to the methodological procedures of qualitative research.

Following, there is an overview of the findings emerged from the focus groups. The results have been grouped in six different themes that try to sum up the real needs and motivations which stay behind tweens' use and desire of brands and how they perceive the influences with their peers.

At the end, final conclusions and recommendations for companies and retailers, that are planning to target tweens, are drawn and ideas for future research are suggested.

## **1. Children as consumers**

This chapter first provides an overview on the main features of the children market. Then it focuses on the specific characteristics of tweens, considered as the heart of kids marketing due to their high purchasing power and competence on brands.

### **1.1 The children market**

The real interest in young consumers raised after the second world war with the baby boom generation (McNeal, 1992). The higher consideration of youth or teenagers as a distinct sub-culture, with its own consumer related priorities, was a result of the booming post-war economy in numerous industrialized societies. The United States probably pioneered, but Europe rapidly followed (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

At that time, commercial interests spread on many sectors of society, creating faster-growing markets for many goods and services, from fashion and entertainment to food and drink. Several of these products were expressly intended to satisfy the desires and aspirations of young consumers (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

By the 1960s this age group was spending \$2 billion a year in America alone. By the end of the 1980s, this number had risen to \$6 billion among young Americans.

This market is extremely lucrative, tripling in the 1990s, with estimates ranging from \$250 billion upwards annually in total sales for children aged 4-14 in the USA alone (Siegel *et al.*, 2001). These figures account not just for their direct purchases, in fact besides the amount of money they spend directly, children and teenagers exert a significant indirect effect on consumer activities, influencing household purchases (McNeal, 1992).

However, the interest in youth marketing probably boomed with the book “Children as consumers: insights and implications” written by Dr. James U. McNeal in 1987. This was the first time that children had been considered as a legitimate market of consumers (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

In 1992, with McNeal’s follow-up book “Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children”, marketers’ interest in this segment of consumers really took a huge leap. In



his book, McNeal stated that children's earlier experiences of consumer activity occur in the first few years of their lives. By the age of four or five they begin to make independent purchases on small scale in local retail outlets and, at the age of ten, in the USA, children have been found to make over 250 purchase visits a year to a variety of stores.

The relevance of the research on the youth market is supported by the fact that childhood experiences are extremely important in shaping patterns of cognition and behaviour in later life. This belief is supported by much research in clinical psychiatry, child development, criminology, and political socialisation (Ward, 1974).

Moreover, McNeal (1992) pointed out that children are extremely relevant to marketers since they can be viewed as "three markets in one": they can be considered as primary market, influence market and future market. In addition, each of these major types of children's market can be segmented accordingly to other different variables such as age, gender and life-style.

Firstly, children are a primary market in their own right. They are present day buyers and consumers, they have their own money, desires and willingness to spend their money in what they want to.

Secondly, they are an influence market because they can have an effect on their parents' purchase decisions. They have a direct influence when they expressly ask for a branded product or a place where to go eating; but they also have an indirect influence since parents, when make purchases, take into consideration their children's preferences.

Finally, they are a future market. Of the three dimensions of the children's market, this has the greatest potential. Branding opinions shaped at an early age can severely impact on children's consumer choices when they grow older and, as a result, can impact on a company's future earnings.

The spending power of children is enormous and steadily growing; in "Targeting the Youth Market" (2000), the research firm Datamonitor mentions four reasons why youth

spending power in Europe and America is increasing. These reasons can be summed up as follows:

- 1) Higher divorce rates allow children to play guilty parents off, one against the other, gaining extra gifts.
- 2) More adults have a career first and children second. This means their earnings are higher when they have kids.
- 3) More dual-income families mean more disposable money.
- 4) Richer parents are spending more time working far from their children. To alleviate their guilt and balance their absence, they often increase pocket money levels.

Since the spending power of young people exhibits this continued growth, marketers, manufacturers and advertisers have become increasingly concerned in planning effective methods of reaching this market. To succeed, they need to understand children as consumers from A to Z: what they believe, what they want, how they behave, how they make decisions and use information. Young people, both children and adolescents, are richer and better informed than they have ever been (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

When dealing with the youth market it is necessary to keep in mind that all children are definitely not alike and it would be a tremendous mistake to consider them as a whole (Siegel *et al.*, 2001). There are dramatic differences from age to age and also from boys to girls. In order not to miss any critical cognitive and behavioural factors that could impact the results of marketing efforts, Siegel and his colleagues (2001) suggest looking at the youth market in as little as two-year increments.

Children can be segmented according to their age. McNeil himself (1992) identified in his book three different groups called “preschoolers, school children and teens”; however, the most convincing basis for children market segmentation comes from the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget.

Piaget’s work and research, first published in 1924, are a primary groundwork for child developmental and educational psychology. Piaget generated a broad view of how intelligence develops from infancy through adolescence and he distinguished four main

stages of cognitive development. He called them: period of sensorimotor intelligence (0-2 years), of preoperational thought (2-7 years), of concrete operations (7-11 years) and of formal operations (11-15 years).

He pointed out considerable differences in the cognitive abilities of children from one age group to the next. He assumed that intelligence development is sequential and driven by a child's experience within his environment. For this reason, it is possible for one child to progress from one stage to the next at a different rate than another. What is sure is that children must move from one stage to the next, building on the cognitive abilities acquired in the previous stages.

Also the research firm Datamonitor, in its report (2000), stresses the importance of dividing the under-18 market into appropriate sub-groups. In particular, it makes a distinction between "kids, tweens and teens", defining them as "key age segments with individual consumer behaviour characteristics".

In contrast with these segmentations of youth based on age and cognitive developments, Daniel Thomas Cook, in his provocative book "The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer" (2004), affirmed that the categories by which children are raised and educated (infant, toddler, child and teen), were invented by clothing industry to enhance sales.

According to Cook (2004), the "child consumer" is not a living, breathing person, but rather a social construction, an aggregation of qualities, beliefs and conjectures concerning the "nature" and motivation of children about commercial goods and meanings. The "child consumer" arises from, and in many ways lives in, speeches produced by marketers, retailers, researchers and advertisers, all of whom have an interest in the children's market (Cook, 2007).

## **1.2 The tween market**

In later years tweens have become the most relevant segment marketers focus on, while in the post war period teenagers have deserved much more attention (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

The term “tween” came out for the first time in 1987, in an article published in the journal “Marketing and Media Decisions” where it was used to identify a segment of children aged from 9 to 15 with its own distinct characteristics and powers (Tufte, 2006). The name derives from the statement that they are a “group of in-be-tweens”, between childhood and adolescence.

Since 1987 the concept of tweens has raised in importance in marketing literature. However, nowadays marketers use many different definitions to identify this group and there are still some disagreements. Some have defined the segment as aged 7 to 14, others as aged 8 to 14, some others as aged 9 to 15 (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

In this paper I adopt the definition of tweens given by Siegel and his colleagues (2001) who consider the age range from 8 to 12 as the most appropriate. In addition, the authors believe there is a significant sub-segmentation of this group that divides it into “emerging younger” and “older transitioning” tweens, with the divide at about age 11. In fact, while only 4 to 5 years separate the upper and the lower ages of this segment, a 12 year old has experienced 50 per cent more in life than the 8 year old and differences between the two sub groups are relevant (Siegel *et al.*, 2001). The authors precise that the “years 8 to 12” age definition is an average representation and the end-points are transitions, especially at the younger end of the range with some 7 year olds already showing clear tween characteristics (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

As a relatively narrow age grouping, tweens are unusual since they share more differences than similarities. They are also very “fickle- fashions” and fads change on a daily basis. Part of the reason for this is that tweens experience one of the biggest life-changing events, the move from junior school to secondary school, or from elementary school to middle school considering the Italian context. They go from being “top of the class” to “bottom of the pile” (Gray, 2006; Smallshaw, 2001).

Tweens are different from kids on the younger end, and from teenagers on the older end. As suggested by the term “tween”, used to describe their condition of being “in between” little kids and teenagers, they have a “split personality” which fights between behaviours and attitudes of a kid, and those of a teenager (Siegel *et al.*, 2001). Tweenagers, more sophisticated than kids, are willing to replicate teenager behaviours,

they start to develop a strong sense of self-awareness and become more susceptible to peer pressure (Datamonitor, 2000).

This group moves from a family-centered lifestyle to one focused on peers. The major shift occurs at the age of 11, when tweens move to middle school and suddenly find they have much more personal freedom, spending power and peer-group influence. The term “Collective individualism” has been used to explain the tweens’ willingness of being conformed and accepted by their peer group and at the same time their need of expressing their own individuality (Gray, 2006).

The area of “tweens as consumers” is increasingly attracting the interest of advertisers, marketing and media specialists as well as sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and economists. Obviously, also teachers, other educators and parents can benefit from the results of the research in this area. Yet, these different actors are motivated by diverse interests and perception of the child (Tufte). In the following section, it is explained why marketers are extremely interested in this group.

### **1.3 The power of tweens**

Tweens are described as the richest and most influential generation in history. They are “sophisticated consumers”, with a considerable financial potential, and can be thought as a “marketer’s dream” (Lindstrom, 2004). Today “tweens are an economic force, they are large and in charge and will determine the winners and losers in the marketplace for years to come” (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

“Children’s financial spending has almost doubled every ten years over the past three decades”. Today, “the tween segment alone is estimated to control and influence an astounding US\$1.88 trillion per year via their pocket money and their general influence on their parents’ purchasing decision” (Lindstrom, 2004, p.175). It is this ability to influence parents to a degree never seen before that distinguishes this generation from the tweens of the past.

A great support to the understanding of this market segment comes from the study BRANDchild, conducted by Millward Brown in 2003, which is the world's largest study on tweens and their relationship with brands. Millward Brown studied tweens across 15 countries and revealed that in most of them, including the USA, the UK, Australia, Germany and Northern Europe, they have developed highly persuasive skills. They have very smart arguments to make certain that family purchases go their way and they are able to influence their parents' brand choices also when the brand is aimed at the parents. They control the final decision in up to 80 per cent of all brand choices and, curiously, the study shows that up to 60 per cent of tweens have a significant influence even on the final choice of a car.

In a study by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, conducted in 1998, it is reported that many parents think their children know more about brands than they do in a variety of product categories. The study also revealed that 69 per cent of parents affirm to talk to their kids about purchases before going shopping, and this increases to 88 per cent if purchasing a product for the child.

Tweens are very aware of what happens in the market, in fact an average child in the USA, Australia and the UK watches between 20-40,000 commercials per year, and an average 10-year-old is familiar with 300 to 400 brand names (Poulter, 2005). According to a study completed in 1999 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, every year children spend 60 per cent more time in front of the television than in school.

Therefore, tweens are the most influential youth market group of all. Unlike younger children, tweens are "better information processors" and can better recognize and accurately declare what they want, including specific brand names. It is assumed that tweens capture more of the decision making through influence, while teens capture more by actually making purchases themselves (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

There is another tween force, as powerful as influence, on the purchase of many household items, which is called "negative influence". Tweens are especially able to make their parents NOT to buy or use items, even when parents know that those items would be good for their kids (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

As suggested above, tweens are able to understand what a brand is and the values it represents (Datamonitor, 2000). Gaining tweens as consumers at this age is vital to companies. The adult brands they learn to trust as tweenagers are likely to be the brands they are going to trust for life (Smallshaw, 2001). Tweens are a consumer segment that can create a \$100+ million brand (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

Marketers realized that to be successful in approaching any generation, they should try to think “the way they do”. In the case of today’s tweens, it is getting harder to think the way they do. They are exposed to so many media, so much learning, so much technology and mostly important, to so much marketing that it becomes almost impossible for marketers to predict how they will react to the next product offering or to the next ad campaign. It has become very difficult to surprise them with very new products and very effective ad campaigns.

Nowadays, tweens are saturated with new products and new campaigns as never before. Moreover, next to the huge number of products to which they are exposed, there is a huge variety of types of products that are marketed to them as well. (i.e. inexpensive digital cameras, downloadable music, DVDs, green ketchup, all now marketed to tweens) (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

There is argument that tweens today are different from tweens yesterday. From a part, physiologically and psychologically, they are the same, but for many aspects they are definitely not alike. What makes today’s tweens different from those of the past is their experiences (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

Today’s tweens are likely to become savvier consumers at an even younger age. Young mothers are trying to encourage and teach their children to make educated product choices at very young ages and always ask for their children’s opinions.

Another change between today’s tweens and those of just a few years ago involves their day-to-day experiences with computer technology and communication devices. They live in an electronic world, they have access to the best PCs in their houses and they prefer to communicate with their friends via digital media. They are addicted to instant messaging and e-mailing and almost every tween possesses a mobile phone or, at least, would like to have one.

Today tweens put much more emphasis on designer clothing. It does not seem to matter if the designer is super expensive, they still want it.

Finally, also the social pressures of “going out” seems to have accelerate as well as the interest in having girl or boy friends (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

Nowadays, the term KGOY is often used when talking about children. It stands for “kids grow old younger”, meaning that childhood has “shrunk” while youth has been expanded. Being 11 or 12 years old today means being young, having opinions and behaviours like the “real” young people (Tufte, 2005).

## **2. Consumer Socialisation**

In the mid-1970's research on children as consumers flourished and gained visibility in the marketing community. In September 1974, an article entitled "Consumer Socialisation," written by Scott Ward and published in "Journal of Consumer Research", gave a further impetus to the progress of the field stressing the importance of studying children and their socialisation into the consumer role. Up to now an impressive body of research has been accumulated on this topic (John, 1999).

Before defining the specific subspecies of “consumer socialisation”, it is wise to explain the meaning of “socialisation”. According to Brim (1966), socialisation is “the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of groups and the society” (cited by Ward,1974, p.2).

In 1974, Ward defined "Consumer socialisation" as “the processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (p.2). It is the specific focus on consumption-relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes, that makes the interest in consumer socialisation different from the one in other aspects of socialisation. This definition focuses on childhood socialisation, however not all learning occurs during this period and the new roles, like those adopted during adolescence, may deeply alter models of earlier learning.



When talking about skills, knowledge and attitudes it is necessary to make a distinction between those directly relevant to consumption behaviour, and those which are indirectly relevant to it.

Directly relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes are those which are required for covering the consumer role, for example, skills at planning money, pricing, knowledge of brands and shopping outlets, and attitudes towards products, brands, and sales people (Ward, 1974).

Indirectly relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes motivate purchases, but are not directly significant in the purchase decision or transaction itself. For example, a college student, who buys a black suit for a business interview, acts responding to perceived norms and role specifications associated with job interviews. Other acts of consumer behaviour may be motivated by the desire of acquiring some products for the successful enactment of particular roles (for example, an adolescent boy's purchase of cigarettes). While both are significant, the indirect component of consumer socialisation is the most interesting for marketers who want to understand why people buy their products (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

There are several reasons for studying the consumer behaviour of young people and their process of consumer socialisation. First of all, research in this area may contribute to the improvement of marketing and information campaigns aimed at young people. Moreover, through research marketers interested in addressing this profitable market segment can increase the success-failure ratio among their campaigns (Ward, 1974).

The area has also raised the interest of consumer behaviour's students because it presents new directions and opportunities for studying and understanding consumer behaviour, inter-generational consistency and change, and the effects of social trends on young people's buying patterns and on family's consumer behaviour (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Finally, also consumer educators and public policy makers are interested in understanding consumer socialisation in order to better deal with this critical target.

Consumer socialisation research is typically based on two models of human learning: the cognitive development model and the social learning model. Consumer

socialisation, in fact, occurs during a period of relevant cognitive and social developments for the individual who lives a series of stages, maturing throughout his/her childhood.

Theories of cognitive development arise primarily from the work of Jean Piaget. These explain the formation of cognitions and behaviours on the basis of qualitative changes (stages) in the cognitive organization that occur between infancy and adulthood. These stages are defined in terms of cognitive structures that a child can use in perceiving and dealing with the environment at different ages (Kohlberg, 1969).

Studies using the social learning approach attempt to explain socialisation as a function of the environmental influences on the individual. Learning is considered to take place when the individual interacts with socialisation agents in different social settings (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

## **2.1 Stage view of Consumer Socialisation**

Age is an important element for the socialisation of children into their consumer role, and there is a vast amount of research specifying the cognitive and social development that occurs with advancing age.

Age-related improvements in cognitive abilities are responsible for the development of consumer knowledge and decision-making skills. For example, well-developed cognitive abilities simplify the process of evaluating products, comparing alternatives and purchasing the chosen item in a store.

Age-related improvements in social development are similarly helpful. Many consumer situations imply interpersonal understanding. For example, when children form impressions about people who use certain products or brands and when they negotiate with their parents to make them purchase the desired items (John, 1999).

Given the importance of age, it is presented, at first, a stage view of consumer socialisation where age is considered the primary factor driving the transition from one stage to the next. These stages, which capture the main shifts from the preschool years

through adolescence, are named: perceptual stage, analytical stage, and reflective stage (John,1999).

The perceptual stage (3-7 years) derives its name from the huge emphasis that children at this stage place on perceptual properties of stimuli rather than on abstract or symbolic thought. The analytical stage (7-11 years) gives its name to the vast improvements in children's abilities to approach matters in more detailed and analytical ways. Finally, the reflective stage (11-16 years) derives its name from the emphasis that children in this stage place on understanding the complex social contexts and meanings related to consumption.

The reflective stage is the most appropriate to this work. The following table provides a summary of research findings about this stage.

Topic	Reflective stage (11–16 years)
Advertising knowledge Decision strategies	Sceptical attitudes towards advertisements Use multiple attributes Full repertoire of strategies
Product and brand knowledge	Substantial brand awareness for adult-orientated as well as child-relevant product categories Understanding and enthusiasm for retail stores
Information search Product evaluation	Gather information on functional, perceptual and social aspects Focus on important attribute information: functional, perceptual and social aspects

Source: Grant and Stephen, 2005, p.454; adapted from John, 1999.

In the reflective stage children become more aware of their role as consumers. Their knowledge about the commercial marketplace and fundamental concepts like pricing and branding become more sophisticated. As children move into adolescence their way of thinking and reasoning is more reflective and become more focused on the social meanings of the consumer marketplace. Moreover, at this stage children pay more attention to the social aspects of being a consumer, taking into account other's people perspective and shaping their own identity to conform to group expectation. This influences their choices and consumption of brands (John, 1999). Moving towards adolescence, knowledge about branding becomes extremely important. Acceptance by the peer group is often guaranteed when an individual wears the "right" brand of T-shirt

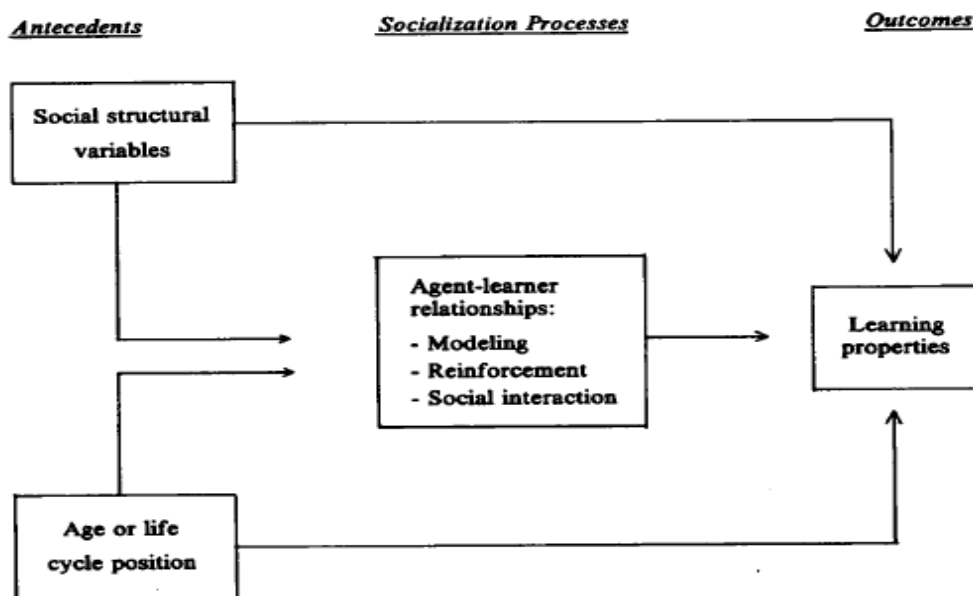
or jeans. Peers play an enormous role when children have to make buying decisions in this early adolescent stage (Grant and Stephen, 2005).

Before concluding this stage description based on age an observation is due: the age ranges for each stage are approximations based on the general tendencies of children in every age group. They are probably most representative of children in the middle to end of each age range and it is possible that the age ranges overlap at transition points between stages (John, 1999).

## 2.2 A model of Consumer Socialisation

Since the important developments in consumer socialisation do not emerge in a vacuum but take place in a social context including the family, peers, mass media, and marketing institutions, it is now presented a model of consumer socialisation which takes into account these elements.

The main elements of this model, produced by Moschis and his colleague (1978), are classified into antecedent variables, socialisation processes, and outcomes.



Source: Moschis and Churchill, 1978, p.600

### *Antecedent Variables*

They may affect the achievement of consumer learning properties (outcome) both directly and indirectly through their impact on the socialisation processes.

*Social structural variables* are factors, like social class and sex, that help to locate the learner within his or her social environment, where learning takes place.

*Age or life cycle position* refers to an individual's lifetime span when learning occurs; it is used to indicate a person's cognitive development or life cycle stage.

### *Socialisation Processes*

The socialisation process incorporates both the socialisation agents and the type of learning actually operating .

*Socialisation agents* may refer to a person or organization. In every person's life there are many people and institutions (family members, school, friends) directly involved in socialisation. They have considerable influence because of their frequency of contact, primacy, and control over rewards and punishments given to the individual. Parents, mass media and peers are considered relevant to consumer socialisation issues and may play a significant role in consumer socialisation, as suggested in different studies (e.g. Moschis, 1985; Ward, 1974).

*Learning processes* refer to the mechanisms through which the agent influences the learner. They can be classified into three categories: modelling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Modelling, also known as observational learning, involves imitation of the agent's behaviour (i.e. do what parents do). Reinforcement presupposes either reward or punishment. Social interaction is less specific and may involve a combination of modelling and reinforcement (i.e. conforming to peer group norms about purchasing and consumption).

### *Outcomes*

*Learning properties* comprehend various consumer-related cognitions and behaviours, such as attitudes toward saving and spending or brand preferences. These are frequently a mixture of abilities and attitudes developed often at an early age (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Since the focus of this work is on peers and their interaction, additional details about this socialisation agent are provided. Peers are a significant source of influence upon children's consumer behaviour, especially among adolescents (Bachmann *et al.*). Even younger (5-10 years old) children's consumer attitudes and values can be shaped by peers' group influence. The general finding is that parental influence decreases, while peer influence increases, with age, for various purchase acts (Ward, 1974).

Children learn basic rational aspects of consumption from parents, but expressive elements of consumption, such as the symbolic meaning of goods, are learnt from peers (Ward, 1974); schools provide training in the "adaptive functions of consumption", meaning the "functions of consumption in the context of broader social roles" (Ward, 1974, p.5). Children develop consciousness of the product social value, starting to pay attention to brands and forming their brand preferences. Research findings also point out that peer influence is more relevant in situations involving conspicuous consumption (Saunders, Samli and Tozier, 1973). During the adolescent years, a girl or a boy's need for independence from parents leads them to establish a dependence on peers. When interacting with their peers about consumption matters, they learn about their peers' product preferences and may take these into account in evaluating products on their own (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Finally, besides comments they might make about products or brands themselves, children and teenagers talk about the way they are advertised. Children frequently talk to their friends about advertisements and these conversations may increase or decrease the effectiveness of advertisements to some extent (Greenberg, 1986).

### **3. Reference Group Influence**

Social group membership has been considered for a long time as a determinant of behaviour. According to this assertion, people belonging to the same social group are supposed to act in accordance with the frame of reference produced by their groups (Merton and Rossi, 1949). However, many individuals do not behave like other members of their social groups and even casual observation can reveal it.

The concept of “reference group”, introduced by Bearden and Etzel (1982), helps to understand the contradiction between social group membership and behaviour.

They defined a reference group as a person or group of persons that significantly influence the behaviour of an individual. People frequently orient themselves to other people, different from members of their groups and they shape their behaviour and evaluations according to them.

The term “reference group” had been conceived, in 1942, by Hyman in a study about social status when he inquired respondents about the individuals or groups they compared themselves to. This first study has been followed by additional research (e.g. Newcomb, 1943 and Sherif, 1948; cited by Bearden and Etzel, 1982) and by numerous refinements that clarified and broadened the meaning of this concept (e.g. Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Shibutani 1955, cited by Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Park and Lessig (1977) defined a reference group as “an actual or imaginary individual or group conceived of having significant relevance upon an individual’s evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour”.

Reference groups can perform many different functions (Merton and Rossi, 1949), in particular, students of consumer behaviour are interested in social influences to explain a consumer’s product and brand choices (e.g. Venkatesan, 1966) and marketers consider the reference group construct as important in at least some types of consumer decision making (Bearden and Etzel, 1982).

Much of the existent literature on reference groups' influence on consumer product and brand choice falls into two major research streams, which can be classified, in terms of methodology and conceptual foci, into informal group studies and perceived influence studies.

### **3.1 Informal group studies**

The informal group studies try to relate “group cohesiveness” to “brand choice congruence” within groups. Examples are provided by Stafford (1966), Witt (1969), and

Witt and Bruce (1970). In these studies, group membership was determined by first asking a number of subjects to nominate others (e.g. friends, relatives, or neighbours), and then by obtaining participation of the nominees.

In his study Stafford (1966) concluded that informal groups have an influence on member brand preferences and that group's cohesiveness offers a favourable environment for group leaders to operate. Yet, cohesiveness is not related directly to the degree of member brand loyalty. Then, it emerged that the higher is the degree of leader's brand loyalty, the greater is the likelihood that other members would prefer the same brand. Finally, if the degree of leader brand loyalty increases, the greater is the percentage of each leader's group becoming brand loyal.

Witt's study (1969) had the primary purpose of exploring the influence of small, informal social groups on their members' brand choice. Two determinants of group influence were involved in the study: group cohesiveness and the group members' knowledge of the behaviour of the other group members. The results showed that the similarity of brand choices within a group is directly proportional to the group's cohesiveness and related to the knowledge of other group members' brand choices. In fact a group member can be influenced by the brand choices of other members only if he/she is aware of their brand choices.

Bruce and Witt's study (1970) indicated that the level of group influence on brand choice decisions varies with the nature of the product. In fact, similarity of brand choice within groups varied significantly among the test products; also the strength of group cohesiveness and similarity of brand choice within groups varied within pairs of test products.

However, the evidence in support of the informal group influence hypothesis is contradictory. For example, Hansen (1969) was unable to support the existence of a relationship between group cohesiveness and brand congruence, and Ford and Ellis (1980) were unable to replicate Stafford's (1966) findings. In particular they stated that



products that are low in visibility, complexity and perceived risk and high in testability are not likely to be susceptible to personal influence. They also raised several questions about methodology and data analysis suggesting that Stafford's results may have been artifactual or attributable to other factors, such as family influence.

### **3.2 Perceived Influence Studies**

The perceived influence studies by Park and Lessig (1977) and Bearden and Etzel (1982) employed survey methodology to evaluate different types of perceived reference group influence across products.

Based on the works by Deutsch and Gerard (1955), Jahoda (1972), and Kelman (1961), Park and Lessig elaborated a scale to measure informational, utilitarian, and value-expressive reference group influence. Subjects were asked to assume that an individual had decided to buy a product but not yet which product's brand. Then, they received verbal descriptions of situations representing the different kinds of reference group influence. Finally, they were asked to specify for each product to what extent each situation was significant to his or her brand choice.

According to Park and Lessig (1977), informational influence occurs when, facing uncertainty, an individual looks for information and trusts sources with high credibility or high experience in order to help him to take a decision; the influence is accepted (internalized) if it is perceived as raising the individual's knowledge of his environment and/or his ability to deal with some aspects of this environment, for example purchasing a product. An individual can use an informational reference group in two different ways. One is to actively search for information from opinion leaders or from a group with the appropriate expertise. Otherwise, the individual makes an inference by observing the behaviour of significant others.

Utilitarian influence occurs when an individual acts according to the desires of others that are important to him in order to obtain a reward or to avoid some punishment and he believes that his/her behaviour will be visible or known to the others.

Value-expressive influence relates to an individual's inclination to enhance or support his/her self-concept. Such an individual is expected to associate him/herself with positive referents and/or dissociate himself from negative referents. The value-expressive reference group influence is typified by two different processes. The first case is when individuals utilize reference groups to express themselves and reinforce their ego. In this case, there should be a consistency between the desire to express one's self and the psychological image related to the reference group. The second case is when individuals are affected by the group simply because they like it. Consistency between one's self image and the psychological image attached to the reference group is not essential. It means that, even if individuals respond to the reference group, like adopting their recommendations, this is irrelevant to the group.

Empirically and conceptually, the utilitarian and value-expressive components are difficult to distinguish and are often combined into a "normative" component of influence (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989).

Using the framework proposed by Bourne in 1957, Bearden and Etzel (1982) expanded upon Park and Lessig's work in a study which investigated when reference groups exert influence. There are two factors that affect reference group influence on brand and product decisions, according to Bourne (1957): a degree of exclusivity and the extent to which it is identifiable. The first factor, which affects the product decision, is operationalized by distinguishing between necessities and luxuries: necessities are items that everyone owns, while luxuries have a certain degree of exclusivity. The second factor, which concerns the brand decision, is operationalized by differentiating between privately and publicly consumed goods; the first kind of goods is seen by others when consumed, while the second is not (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). As in Park and Lessig's (1977) study, subjects were asked to specify their agreement with statements, manifesting the types of reference group influence, concerning product or brand choices.

The study's results supported Bearden and Etzel's hypothesis about differences in perceived reference group influence between publicly and privately consumed products. For publicly consumed products, reference group influence for the product's brand is

strong because brand consumption will be seen by others while, for privately consumed products, influence is weak because brand consumption is inconspicuous.

Finally, Moschis (1976) employed Festinger's (1954) theory of "social comparison" to explain why informal groups influence purchasing behaviour. Since this study did not examine actual brand choices, it can be classified as a perceived influence study. Group influence was determined by having subjects indicate their level of agreement with statements such as "Many cosmetic items I own are similar to those of my friends". From the results it emerged that informal groups exert a great influence on their members' purchasing behaviours when there is a high degree of similarity among members on various attributes relevant to products under consideration. The more similar consumers are to their friends on various attributes the more likely they are to trust this personal channel of information.

### **3.3 Dissociative reference groups**

The reference group studies presented in the previous section focused on positive reference groups, those that individuals wish to be associated with. However, there are reasons to believe that not only positive reference groups are important in determining consumer preferences.

There is another type of reference group, which have implications for consumer evaluations and choices of brand and products, and it is known as dissociative (or negative) reference group. Individuals wish to avoid being associated with dissociative reference groups and they "disidentify" with them (Englis and Solomon, 1995).

A dissociative reference group is a unique and influential type of out-group that the individual is specifically motivated to avoid. In fact, there are also some other out-groups that the individual is just not concerned about, without being worried in avoiding acts that could make him associated with them (White and Dahl, 2006).

White and Dahl (2006), across three studies, demonstrated that, when a product is associated with a dissociative reference group, consumers are less disposed to choose it and they consider it more negatively.

The tendency to avoid a product related to a dissociative reference group is largely driven by self-presentational concerns (White and Dahl, 2006). Other studies found that individuals involved with self-presentation are particularly focused on avoiding negative outcomes (Wooten and Reed, 2004). White and Dahl (2006) proposed that self-presentation concerns underlie the consumers' tendency to avoid products associated with dissociative groups. In fact, dissociative reference groups represent groups that consumers wish to avoid association with, and avoidance of negative outcomes is an important component of self-presentation.

Consumers are more likely to negatively evaluate and avoid choosing a product associated with a dissociative group when consumption occurs in public rather than in private (White and Dahl, 2006). This is in accordance with studies which indicate that reference groups may have greater influence when the product is publicly rather than privately consumed (Bearden and Etzel, 1982).

Finally, White and Dahl (2006) demonstrated that people more concerned in private self-consciousness show higher susceptibility to dissociative reference group influence. According to Scheier and Carver (1985, p.687), public self-consciousness refers to "the tendency to think about those self-aspects that are matters of public display" as well as to the concern with the "qualities of the self from which impressions are formed in other people's eyes".

#### **4. Symbolic Brand Consumption**

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller... and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Roper and Shah, 2007).

Nowadays, building a strong brand and increasing brand equity have become management priorities. However, managers need to face the fast-changing marketing environment, characterized by savvier consumers and increasing competition, and where traditional marketing tactics are no more effective. In this complex marketing world, they have to fight with difficult issues about branding and their brands (Keller, 2003; Tan and Ming, 2003).

A deeper understanding of how consumers feel, think and act could offer precious guidance to address these brand-management challenges and to improve the design and implementation of brand-building marketing programs (Keller, 2003).

In particular, Keller (2003) underlined the importance of understanding consumer brand knowledge, considered as the source of brand equity. In fact, it is able to generate differential consumer responses, affecting the success of brand-building marketing programs.

The key dimensions of brand knowledge, which are the different kinds of information that may become linked to a brand, have been “synthesized” by Keller in the following eight ones: awareness, attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences. They may become a part of consumer memory and affect consumer response to marketing activities.

In particular, benefits are the “personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the brand's product attributes” (Keller, 2003, p.596) and derive from the brand's purchase or consumption. They can be functional or experiential and symbolic (Keller, 2003). Much of this work's focus is on the symbolic function of brands, in fact, nowadays managers, in order to improve their brands' competitiveness, try to differentiate their brands through something more than functional attributes alone (Tan and Ming, 2003). Actually, individuals consume products and brands for their symbolic properties as well as for functional benefits (Levy 1959). They not only buy things for what these can do but in many cases they are more interested in the meaning of these things.

It is strongly believed, in many modern societies, that “to have is to be” (Dittmar, 1992); people express themselves through consumption in numerous ways and transfer messages to other people through their use of products and brands (O'Cass, 2004).

Goods are part of the individuals' “live information system”, and their symbolic meaning is grounded in their social context (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996). In this symbolism the messages that individuals may wish to transmit to other socially significant people are enclosed (Belk, 1988; Leigh and Gabel, 1992 ).

Therefore, in virtually all cultures, visible products and services are the bases for deductions about the status, personality, and disposition of the owner or consumer of

these goods. This is not reflected only in the number and type of possessions, but also in other features like style, colour, uniqueness, condition and brand name (Belk, 1978). Sometimes visible consumption information is integrated with other information known about an individual and helps in developing the overall impression of this person. Some other times, visible consumption cues dominate the overall impression, either because these cues are highly distinctive or because it is the case of observing strangers or casual acquaintances and little additional personal information is available (Belk, 1978).

Researchers have recognized that the symbolic images of a product are often more important than the actual physical attributes and characteristics (Graeff, 1996).

In fact, there are two different kinds of benefits that the individual can achieve from the consumption of goods. There are “experiential” and “symbolic” benefits. The first category, called also “functional” benefits, concerns the actual benefits from the product or brand, such as speed, advanced technology, low fat, while symbolic benefits typically correspond to non-product related attributes and relate to underlying needs for social approval, personal expression and self-esteem (Keller, 1993).

The brand is often regarded as separate from the functional product. The product is seen as providing core functional benefits, while the brand itself is responsible for creating “the magnetic superhuman-like aura around the actual product” (Tan and Ming, 2002, p.211). Brand is seen as important in building individual identity, a sense of achievement and individuality for consumers (O’Cass and Frost, 2002).

It is often for this emotional resonance that brands has in the consumers’ life that they accept to pay a premium price for having them (Roper and Shah, 2007).

Brands are not born with symbolic meanings and values but acquire them later in their life. Since brands need to help individuals in expressing themselves and in cultivating their identity, brands’ values need to move from instrumental to symbolic.

As it happens for people, brands pass through life-cycle stages. At certain stages, the potential for branding becomes so high that the brand can eclipse the physical product that it represents. Many authors explained the life-cycle stages of brands through

models. Below, Tag and Ming's "model of brand concept and images" is presented, adapted from Goodyear's model; it describes the life of a brand in six stages.

Type of branding	Stage	Features
Classic branding	Unbranded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commodities, packaged goods</li> <li>• Supplier has power; little effort to distinguish or brand goods</li> <li>• Consumer's perception of goods is utilitarian</li> </ul>
	Brand as reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand name used for identification</li> <li>• Advertising support focuses on rational attributes</li> <li>• Consumers primarily value brands for their utilitarian value</li> <li>• Name over time becomes guarantee of quality/consistency</li> </ul>
	Brand as personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketers give brands personalities because differentiation on rational/functional attributes exceedingly difficult</li> <li>• Marketing support focuses on emotional appeal</li> <li>• Value of the brand becomes self-expression</li> <li>• Advertising puts brand into context</li> </ul>
	Brand as icon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumer now 'owns' brand and uses it to create self-identity</li> <li>• Brand taps into higher-order values of society</li> <li>• Advertising assumes close consumer-brand relationship</li> <li>• Use of symbolic brand language</li> <li>• Brand often established internationally</li> </ul>
Post-modern branding	Brand as company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand has a complex identity and consumers assess them all</li> <li>• Need to focus on corporate benefits to diverse 'customers'</li> <li>• Communications from the firm must be integrated throughout all of their operations</li> <li>• Consumers become actively involved in the brand creation process</li> </ul>
	Brand as policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company and brands aligned to social and political issues</li> <li>• Consumers 'vote' on issues through companies</li> <li>• Consumers now 'own' brands and companies, and are involved in policies</li> </ul>

Source: Tan and Ming, 2002, p.212

At the "unbranded" stage products appear as commodities and modest effort is made by suppliers to differentiate their goods from others.

At the "brand as reference" stage the brand is a name used for identification goals and becomes a guarantee of quality and consistency. Brands are advertised and the focus is on their rational attributes.

At the "brand as personality" stage, many brands have become able to offer the same functional benefits and differentiation becomes more difficult. For this reason, the brand is given a "personality through the addition of emotional appeals and symbolic values and meanings".

At the "brand as icon" stage the brand becomes synonymous with those values and meanings with which it has been associated for a long time and becomes an icon for the

consumers. Examples are provided by Rolex or Rolls-Royce that have become synonymous with classiness and success to consumers.

At the “brand as company” stage the values of the brand are extended beyond the product to touch every aspect of the company. Customers, stakeholders and business partners all share the same image of the company and corporate communication is integrated throughout all the company’s operations.

At the final stage, “brand as policy”, the company brand moves beyond commerce and becomes involved in social and political issues; consumers “own brands and companies” and they are involved in its policies.

It is at the “brand as personality” stage that marketers begin to introduce symbolic values and meanings to their brands to create the “brand personalities” required. At that stage, a conscientious choice of a few symbolic values is indispensable to the success of a brand. From this moment on, every kind of corporate communications, in particular advertising and sales promotions, should be used to strengthen those values and meanings that are considered valuable and important by the consumers. In the end, these symbolic values and meanings of the brand would provide the basis for brand equity in terms of “the sum total of consumers’ perceptions and feelings about the product’s attributes and how it performs” (Tan and Ming, 2002, p.213).

Also Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) consider that the symbolic meaning of a brand is taken into account by consumers when they evaluate the brand’s image. Bansanko (1995) states that individuals tend to rely on certain expensive possessions as symbols of their achievement and indication of their wealth.

Consumers give meaning to certain brands through the perceived “status value” and these brands are perceived as “status symbols” (Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn, 1999). These status values related to the brand are a means to show the status of its owner and generate other people’s estimation. The more the society pays attention to economic status differences, the more the symbolic goods which signalize these differences are given importance (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). Veblen in 1953 formulated



the idea of “conspicuous consumption” to indicate the practice of using products and brands to signal social status aspiration to other consumers (O’Cass and Frost, 2002).

#### **4.1 Children and brand symbolism**

Branding is not only an adult affair. At six months of age, when babies begin imitating simple sounds like “ma-ma”, they are also able to form mental images of corporate logos and mascots. Since the time they are born they are in fact surrounded by brands, from Pampers diapers, to J&J baby powder and Plasmon baby food (Ji, 2002). At the age of two they can develop relationship with certain brands, such as cereals’ brand, which may last a lifetime (McNeal, 1992).

As kids grow older, they not only use more brands, such as McDonalds’ food and Barbie dolls, through the purchases of their parents, but they also start to buy products using their own income (McNeal, 1999). Overall, children consume a broad range of brands and these first experiences may definitely influence their choices when they become adults (Siegel *et al.*, 2001).

When kids consume and experience brands, either bought by themselves or by their parents, they also become conscious that there are other product brands that they are likely to consume when they become adults, such as automobiles, telephone services, banks, and airlines. By observation and word-of-mouth, children collect, little by little, perceptions of these brands in their minds. For this reason children can be considered as a “future market” for every producer of consumer goods and services (McNeal, 1999).

As stated in the previous section, adults exploit the symbolic meaning of brands in order to demonstrate a superior level of status both to themselves and to the significant others surrounding them. Also in children’s life the symbolic role of material objects and brands is huge. And in a similar way they can use brands as a device to communicate a message to their peer group (Harper *et al.* 2003).

The use of brands by children changes during their growth, from functional reasons when they are younger to more contemplative and symbolic interpretations when they grow up (Dittmar, 1992; Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995).

In particular, brands are central in the life of today's tweens who are considered the most brand conscious and materialistic generation of children to date (Lindstrom, 2004). Twenty years ago, tweens used to consider brands as a sort of "mark of quality" and the product's functionality was the most important attribute to them. Nowadays, their focus is more on the brand itself and less on the other attributes of the product (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003). The brand itself is a symbol of different lifestyles, norms and values and contributes to the tweens' identity, more for what it represents than for what it is and tweens use brands as a means for telling others how they would like to be perceived (Martensen, 2007).

Tweens experience stages of uncertainty, they are leaving their status of kids but are not yet teenagers. Material possession is therefore a means through which they can establish their identity (Belk, 1988).

Tweens can try to "preserve, enhance, alter, or extend their identity" by purchasing and consuming brands and products with "images" or "personalities" they believe to be in harmony with their own self-image. Or, on the contrary, they can try to avoid brands and products which are not in accordance with the self-image they want. Products are able to reveal something about the person who uses them (Martensen, 2007).

Moreover, since the "sense of belonging" is very important for tweens, they use the symbolic content of products and brands chosen to reflect their affiliation or connection to a particular social group (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). On the other hand, they might discard certain products and brands on the basis of their symbolic meanings if these are considered incongruent with the consumption choices of significant referents (Elliott, 1999).

Girls in particular "use products for positioning themselves in relation to different girlfriend communities by underlining similarities or differences. They use products for placing themselves in a material culture by for instance following the trend shared by a large cultural community". (Olesen 2003; cited by Martensen, 2007)

Finally, it is worth noting that even if brands are vital for image building, they are in a certain way as a “double-edged sword”. In fact, they feel a huge peer pressure to have what all the others have because not having a particular brand can undermine their self-esteem (Schor , 2004).

## **4.2 Fashion and technology**

The main product category chosen for this work is fashion apparels (clothes, shoes and accessories) since brands in this product category have been demonstrated to have important symbolic value for consumers regardless of age, gender or class (Hogg, Bruce and Hill, 1998).

In general, in tweens and teenagers’ lives, clothing can be considered as an essential social tool (Hogg *et al.*, 1998). More and more tweens, even eight-year-old ones, consider essential to wear the right brand, as they link their sense of the self to their particular brand choices (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003).

In accordance with Bearden and Etzel (1982) model, clothing can be classified as a “public necessity” where reference group influence on the product category is weak, whereas reference group influence on the brand choice is strong.

Fashion clothing is regarded to be a product category where young people have particularly strong views about brand image. The image of the product does not only depend on its physical characteristics, but it also derives from other associations, such as “stereotypes of the generalized or typical user” (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004).

Different studies (e.g. Elliot and Leonard, 2004; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004) confirm that this product category is very appropriate for the analysis of the symbolic meaning of brands for young people.

In their study Elliot and Leonard (2004) identified some social impacts of branding such as peer pressure and bullying. They revealed that some children are teased by others considered “cooler” just because they possess the right product and brands. The lack of possession of the same things that everyone else has, can make children victims of mockery and derision. The authors researched attitudes towards fashion brands focusing on the category of sports shoes.

Instead, Piacentini and Mailer (2004) affirmed the role of clothing as an essential social tool in the lives of young people. They are used as a means of self-expression, they are able to provide other children with a certain image of themselves and give the opportunity to stereotype other people according to which label they wear.

While these studies mainly focus on clothing brands, I considered interesting to compare them with technology brands and products in order to find out if these can have the same symbolic meaning to Italian tween girls.

In recent years, the wide tweens' influence on decisions regarding household purchases has affected also the purchases of new technical products about which tweens often have more technical knowledge than their parents (Martensen, 2007).

In particular, in the last years children have increasingly adopted the mobile phone. In Italy, as it came out from the "Second Report on young people consumption" presented in September 2007, the 84 per cent of students aged between 8 and 15 have their own mobile. This is a product category that as regards awareness, interest, involvement, consumption and staging, is at the same level as fashion wear (Martensen, 2007).

Like clothing, the mobile phone is able to fulfil many different needs. On the one hand it gives increased availability and it represents a security factor for both children and adults. On the other hand, it has a "great signal value and its many technically sophisticated functions give the children a possibility to act as frontrunners and trendsetters" (Martensen, 2007). Moreover, the mobile phone can play a central role in order to achieve social status among friends. If everyone, or almost everyone, in a group of friends has a mobile phone, a child that does not own one risks feeling left out or being teased about it. Finally this may affect the child's self-confidence and social recognition (Martensen, 2007).

Tweens also spend time in choosing among the right brands for their mobile phones, considering only those which are accepted by the group and are popular among its trendsetting members. Possessing the right brand can be a way to be more popular and "in" inside the group, and to raise the level of acceptance and belonging (Martensen, 2007).

## 5. Methodology

The contributes to consumer socialisation and reference group studies presented in the previous chapters mostly came from quantitative researches through the use of experiments and the analysis of questionnaires results, while brand symbolic consumption studies alternate qualitative to quantitative methods of research.

This study utilized purely qualitative methods to explore tween girls' attitudes towards fashion and technology brands and to comprehend how their behaviour is affected by peers. This methodology allowed to gain a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon, directly from the perspective of these girls.

The objective of this qualitative research is to go beyond what the interviewed said in order to formulate qualitative hypothesis about their behaviours and the motivations that stay behind. Understanding their feelings, their thoughts and their needs is extremely valuable to better understand the complex contest in which they live.

Another important aspect of the research was the importance attributed to observation. In fact, asking good questions is not enough for the purpose of such kind of study and it is vital to notice details too, in order to create connections between what is observed and what is heard.

The research took the form of five focus group interviews which lasted approximately two, two and a half hours. Each focus group consisted of five to seven tween girls, aged between 11 and 13, for a total of thirty girls. According to Gunter and Furnham (1998), it is advisable not to mix together, within the same focus group, widely disparate age groups and boys with girls. These focus groups respected these suggestions. Since this is a small convenience sample it was not appropriate to apply statistical techniques to the results.

The focus group is a popular marketing research technique with all age groups and it is widely used to study young consumers (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). The technique can be an effective way of finding out what children really want from different products and services. If handled with care, focus group can provide valuable information about young consumers, about the factors influencing their consumption habits and

preferences and finally it can also give a better understanding of the language used to discuss these matters (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Often, valuable information for marketers resides not simply in what children say about consumer matters, but in how they say it. Focus groups are generally regarded as a worthwhile exercise and can generate many ideas and opinions, as well as demonstrate the language of the young consumer.

A focus group has numerous advantages, embracing speed, flexibility, assessment of attitudes, group interaction as well as providing information on new topics (Grant and Stephen, 2005). Moreover, during a focus group it is possible to see how children interact with each other, how they exchange their opinions and if there is any peer's influence that could shape their consumer values and preferences.

The thirty girls interviewed were attending middle school; precisely, twelve were attending the first year, twelve the second and six the third. Some of the girls attending the third year have just turned 13, so they do not perfectly match with the definition of "older transitioning tweens" given by Siegel and his colleagues (2001). However, the authors considered that age definition as an average representation; therefore, I considered interesting and convenient to the purpose of this study to include them in the sample.

The first four focus groups have been made in Forlì, an Italian city of 116 thousand inhabitants in Emilia-Romagna region. One of them has been conducted at one girl's house. The other three have been made in the public middle school I attended years ago. Thanks to the collaboration of a member of the teaching staff and to the permission given by the school director, I could make the focus groups inside the school building, during class hours. The fifth focus group has been conducted in Biassono, a small town with a population of around 11 thousand inhabitants, near the city of Monza, in Lombardy. This focus group was taken at the house of one of the girls participating at the focus group that I personally know.

Since subjects can become reticent about opening up in front of other participants (Guber and Berry, 1993), I preferred choosing groups of friends, or at least acquaintances, to take part in the same focus group.

I was aware of the age of the girls interviewed and the importance of gaining their approval, as well as that of their parents, before conducting the focus groups. No resistance to take part in the focus groups was found either on the part of the parents, who signed the permission to use the data of the interviews or the girls, who that were unanimously in favour of assisting me in an area of research they had a huge interest in.

One of the major functions of the selected methodology is to “help the blind man see” (Grant and Stephen, 2005), in fact the way I approached them was asking to tell me as much as they could. I told them there were no right or wrong answers and, since I did not know anything about their world, every personal feeling and experiences they told me could help me to understand it.

One drawback of the focus group technique is that individuals may feel peer pressure and the group may be dominated by forceful children whose views shade collective opinion. Even if the focus groups made were not too numerous, between 5 and 7 girls, not everyone contributed to the discussion to the same extent. This may have depended both on the level of interest in the product categories and in brands, since some girls were more concerned than others in clothes and branding, and on their own personal characters, since those more shy were less comfortable in starting to speak when not addressed directly. As a moderator, I tried to give the opportunity to contribute to everyone.

Moreover, even if the girls knew each other before the interviews because they are in the same class, they were not always comfortable in talking all together. In one of the focus group made in the middle school, there were six girls and it was more than evident that they were split into two sub-groups and did not feel free of expressing their real thoughts in front of the others. These focus group participants discussed the topic in a way which mimicked an “acceptable party-line” (Gunter and Furnham, 1998), but which did not necessarily represent their real views.

Since I conducted this study alone, I was the only moderator during the focus groups. I used a semi-structured approach since I developed and used a “focus group guide”, which was a list of questions and topics that I had to cover during the conversation, without any particular order. I followed the guide during the interviews but, since some girls were more interested in certain subjects, others in different ones, not every focus group had the same structure and the different topics got different weight in every focus group. Moreover, sometimes, new cues came from the words of the interviewed who spontaneously suggested new aspects linked to the main topic.

In order to stimulate their reactions about branding I had created a collage where I put the logos of around ninety brands, ranging from children brands to adult ones and I brought it with me during the interviews. The interviewed were also asked to bring their own collage where they put images of products they like and of famous people they would like to be similar to. Finally they were asked to write a “wish list” where they could write their desires.

The interviewees’ responses were analyzed by grouping them into six related themes and drawing conclusions which formed the basis of the findings presented in the following chapter. Each respondent’s comments were cross analyzed to highlight similarities and differences in the answers to the questions asked.

The dataset consisted of 252 pages, 1.5 spaced A4 size, of verbatim transcriptions of the girls’ discussions, the collages mentioned above and their wish lists. All the material has been analyzed according to the methodological procedures of qualitative research.

## **6. Findings**

The girls interviewed were really interested in the main categories chosen for the purpose of the study –fashion apparels and technologies– and they willingly talked about them, giving their impressions, providing examples and expressing their feelings, which helped me to understand what the complex tween girls’ world is made of.

The thirty girls forming the sample of my study confirmed the assumption that children are definitely not alike (Siegel *et al.*, 2001; Smallshaw, 2001). First of all, there are great



differences between girls at the first year of middle school and those who are attending the third year, confirming that those years are a period of significant growth for children. Moreover, it was easy to find out a multiplicity of behaviours and attitudes also among girls of the same age, since there are many different factors affecting them, such as family and siblings, friends, class mates and evidently their own personality.

The findings are wide and give many points of view of the same phenomenon, reflecting what has been written just above. These findings can be grouped in the following six main themes: “A new school, a new consciousness”; “Once upon a time..there WAS a child”; “Little women..growing up”; “Same friends, same brands”; “Peers’ influences and interaction”; “Mother and daughter”.

### **6.1 A new school, a new consciousness**

The transition from elementary to middle school in a children’s life is much more than a change of school, classmates and teachers. When the children arrive at middle school they find a new environment, made of older people, where the oldest ones are just a step before high school and before being real teenagers.

This new environment is much more complex than the one they were used to, made by a set of social rules and codes that must be accepted by the children in order not to be marginalized. Girls revealed to be conscious of this, they know that other people draw inferences about one another based on product choices and possessions and since when they arrived at the new school they have been very careful in how they presented to other peers.

*-What did you wear the first day of school?*

*-It has been a hard choice! (Iaia, 11 years old)*

*-It took me a month to choose! (Maddy, 11 years old)*

*-The same for me! The week after the last day of elementary school I was already thinking about what to wear on my first day at middle school! (Iaia, 11 years old)*

*-Why?*

*-I wanted to give a good first impression to my new classmates! That was my goal! (Iaia, 11 years old)*

*-Me too! I wanted to give a good impression and eventually I decided to wear stretch black jeans and a t-shirt! (Ciaci, 11 years old)*

Through the use of specific brands and products, tween girls try to actively build their image in the social and cultural context where they live. They start to take into account how they dress and which accessories are trendy, they learn through the interaction with their peers and through personal observations what is socially acceptable and what is not. This is relevant to notice since, as they affirmed, only at this stage of their maturity, they really start to care about this. These tween girls have just reached the “reflective stage” of their consumer socialization process and they have a more sophisticated approach to impression formation. According to John (1999), it is in this stage that they start to develop an understanding of the social meaning and prestige associated with certain products and brand names.

In fact, even if they started changing their tastes already at the end of elementary school, inquiring about what was trendy and getting to know more brands, they were peacefully living in their condition of children, letting their mothers decide for them most of the times and not being worried if a “small butterfly or a flower appeared on their sweaters”. There was no need to worry about what mates thought of one another, simply because they were much more interested in themselves than in the peers around them. Moreover, in many elementary schools children are bound to wear a pinafore and, this even more reduces any aspiration in wearing nice clothes, since it prevents others from seeing what there is underneath.

Once they are at middle school, around the age of eleven, girls unconsciously start to realize they need to affirm a new image of themselves, separated from that of a child, to fit to the new context they belong to. They use brands and products to reduce the sense of uncertainty and inadequacy they feel in this period of physical and mental transformations. For this reason, they start to pay more attention to clothes, accessories and shoes and they desire adults’ brands which are trendy, famous and often expensive.

*- Anyway, we started talking about brands when we arrived at middle school, because before, in elementary school, we didn't care about it at all! we wore pinafores..and they were covering our clothes..” (Ade, 12 years old)*

*- Then when we arrived at middle school we found so many people around, dressed in branded clothes... (Mary, 12 years old)*

- ...and we started to get interested in.. “Where did you buy it? How much does it cost?”.. (Ade, 12 years old)
- If I go to school wearing clothes without any brand... (Mary, 12 years old)
- ..well it’s not that they are going to exclude you! (Fre, 12 years old)
- Yes, I know..but..if you see that everyone, or at least most of the people, is wearing branded stuff, you know .. you may want it too! (Mary, 12 years old)
- Yes for me it’s like..when I don’t have branded clothes I feel uncomfortable, because everyone is wearing them! (Ade, 12 years old)

During the tween years, a remarkable transition takes place on the cultural front as explained by Siegel *et al.* (2001) and confirmed in the focus groups. Tweens go from wearing clothes selected by their mothers, to having a personal interest in their own fashion and becoming the predominant decision-makers for their own fashion purchases. They know (not their mothers!) what must be worn to go to school, what is more suitable to go out for a birthday party or to the movies. Moreover, their consumer knowledge has increased and they are able to differentiate products and brands for the various occasions and are very proud of affirming that they can finally dress as they like. Mothers are often wrong about clothes, they are outdated and antiquated and “are very able to buy garments that their daughters do not like”.

Inside themselves they feel more mature and they want other people to recognize this maturity; this is also testified by the way they describe the elementary school period, as if it has been long time ago, whereas little time has passed. They are surprised when they think how they were dressed in their childhood and they remark they have changed and grown up.

*“I have seen a picture I took during elementary school! I was dressed with a red tracksuit, it was red! And I thought: ‘Oh my God!’. Because I would never wear such a thing now!! It was quite a surprise!” (Alexis, 12 years old)*

Moreover, when talking about elementary school they often blame their mothers for the “weird” way they were dressed and this is an additional reason for loving their new independence in the choice of products and brands and not for passively accepting anymore what others decide for them. These 11-13 year-old-girls succeed in affirming their opinion and mothers have to face the fact that they must leave their girls free to

choose their own style (obviously, as long as it is appropriate in terms of price and age). Mothers sometimes buy products for their daughters on their own but only if they are sure they can change it or because they have received in advance detailed information about the product, the brand and the place where they can buy it. For sure, tweens have the last word. In contrast with the results of the study by Harper *et al.* (2003), who identified that parents tend to consider brand and logos unimportant in children's purchase decisions, these girls made me understand that their mothers really are aware of this and often propose to buy branded clothes as presents on special occasions.

As the girls interviewed made me understand, the commitment in appearing cool and suitable for the social contest is strictly connected to their awareness that, at their age, individuals easily confine their remarks to appearance and make judgments on the basis of superficial details, especially about people they do not know well (Belk, 1978). At first they express comments about other tweens, both girls and boys, and admit not to be always very kind in commenting on them. Since they are the first to be critic, they are very careful about how appearing in order not to be victims of others' bad opinions, especially when they are in an unfamiliar contest.

*"We usually sleep at our friends' place, and the night, late in the night, we start talking and gossiping about other people.." (Gaietta, 11 years old)*

For this reason, to be appropriate within this contest, tweens start developing a more involved relationship with brands and attributing them a meaning in order to create their own image and identity. They need to develop their social skills to take into account all these social aspects when they choose how to show themselves.

Since fashion is not the only thing important in the life of a tween girl, it is time to talk about portable technologies, essential mates of her daily life.

The more desired objects, according to what emerged during the focus groups and from the "wish lists" they wrote, are Nintendo Ds, mp3 readers and mobile phones.

Nintendo Ds is a game they have played since they were younger and among 11 years old girls, just arrived at middle school, it is still an exciting pastime. They use it for fun,

as an entertainment, mostly when they are at home since they are not allowed to play during class time. They can play with it alone or together through the infrared system. However, during middle school years, there is a shift of interest from this kind of games towards mobile phones because of the symbolic meaning and relational functions they offer.

At the age of eleven, some girls already have their mobile but they never use it because their friends do not have it. Some other girls do not have their own mobile yet and these are the ones that desire it the most and cannot wait to have one. They think that the mobile phone will give them more freedom, that they will feel more independent and more responsible and it seems as if parents consider them older .

Once at the second year of middle school, mobile phones become an indispensable mate for tweens, who always keep them in their pockets and could not live without.

*“I was about to lose it. I left it in the shop! My mum asked me: “Do you have your mobile phone?”, and I said: “Oh my God, oh my God, my life!!!” and I ran back to the shop..” (Silvy, 12 years old)*

Since almost everybody possesses one, there is a widespread use of text messages and phone calls and they devote a part of their pocket money to top up their mobiles. They really like their mobile phones, but from what I could see, they probably do not take much care of them since in just a couple of years they broke down more than one, because of lack of attention. As the mobile phone is a unisex and anonymous object, they opt for coloured versions if existent, otherwise they try to decorate them in original and personal ways, using colourful cases or attaching nice stickers on.

*“My mobile phone has a bar code! It is super original! It is a sticker!”  
(Je, 12 years old)*

## **6.2 Once upon a time..there WAS a child**

Girls attending middle school are living a huge transition phase of their lives, they are growing up quickly and they fight to affirm their image, trying to take it apart from the one they had when they were children, in order to be considered as close as possible to a teenager. The term KGOY (“kids grow old younger”) has often been used in papers

about tweens (Tufte, 2005), to indicate that childhood has been compressed while youth has been extended, and that being 11 or 12 years old today does not mean anymore being a child but a young girl. The findings of this work confirm the statement.

Many researches about symbolic brand consumption of children and teenagers focused on the fact that children use brands to create their identity and their image of cool trendy people (e.g. Elliot and Leonard, 2004; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004, Grant and Stephen, 2005, Ross and Harradine, 2004, Roper and Shah, 2007). However, not enough attention has been given to how and why they use brands and products to affirm their youth and distance from childhood.

In fact, tweens consider themselves as young girls not as kids; some of the eleven-year-olds may define themselves as “transitioning children” but not completely children; all the others, who define themselves girls, are upset when they perceive that parents or other adults still see them as a kid.

*“I hate being considered a child!! I also get annoyed when my parents don’t let me do something.. and they say: ‘You’re still a child!’ I can’t stand that.” (Lily, 13 years old)*

Tweens use their brands to affirm their personality and, as stated in the previous paragraph, their maturity. At the same time they are extremely aware of their condition of “in-between”, in which they are not very different from children yet and which makes them, in some way, insecure. Therefore, they make sure they avoid all those symbols that could make them be confused with a child and, at the same time they are willing to adopt those which can enhance their image as a girl.

For what concerns the first point, tweens affirmed that, when choosing how to dress, they should definitely avoid childish clothes. There are some brands that are unquestionably linked to kids, above all Barbie and Winx. These girls look at their younger sisters or cousins, who are still attending elementary school, and consider these brands suitable and cool for them; other girls laugh remembering their passion for these brands when they were younger. However, these brands are now forbidden in their wardrobes and must be avoided when going to school, or to other places where peers are expected to be met. Otherwise tweens would feel ashamed and inappropriate

and risk becoming victims of teasing easily. They are so scared of being inappropriate that even if the clothes' features were cool, they would not wear such clothes any longer unless they could remove or hide the logo in some way.

*-At home, I have a Winx outfit.. well.. it is a little bit trendy, because it's in two parts, one made of jeans and the other is in cotton.. but it's a Winx one .. you know.. (Vale, 11 years old)*

*-I had a pair of old trousers, they were cool, so I told my mum to take the Winx logo off... because they were still nice..and now I'm wearing them! I like them! (Gaietta, 11 years old)*

*-I cannot remove it from my clothes..and so.. I am not wearing them! (Vale, 11 years old)*

It is interesting to notice that girls who still own these brands, either because they fit the same size as at elementary school or because they received them as a gift; sometimes they agree to wear them if, and only if they are sure they are not going to be seen by their peers, like during a holiday with their parents or at home. The peers' influence in this case is very important. The refusal of these brands is due to the fact that tweens feel inappropriate wearing them and not because of a drastic change of their personal tastes. When tweens arrive at middle school, they know things are changed and there are some "rules" to follow in order to be cool. If they do not want to be perceived as losers they have to accept these "social codes" (McCracken and Roth,1989).

*"Everyone pretends to be young, with their underwear out of their trousers, just to be cool..we cannot wear something Winx!!" (Gaietta, 11 years old)*

The refusal for kids' brands emerged also while they were looking at the collage I created for them, when they declared not to like all those brands perceived for children just from the logo, even if they did not know them before.

The feeling of being "in-between" is confirmed by the particular attitude they have towards some brands like Mickey Mouse or some particular clothes like training pants. For what concerns Mickey Mouse, older girls can wear it to appear hilarious and funny, feeling nostalgic of their childhood. On the one hand, tweens are aware that teenagers wear this brand and, considered their propensity to copy the brands of older girls, they

might desire it. But this does not happen. On the other hand, In fact, they are conscious that the border with childhood is so thin that such brand on them would be perceived in a different way, probably making them appear childish or like a loser. Since they definitely do not want it to happen, they prefer not to wear this kind of brands, even if they may like the print and the features.

The same thing happens with tracksuits that are taken as the typical clothes in the stereotype of children still dressed by mothers, who do not care about their look.

*-Adidas tracksuits..well.. older girls wear them!! (Je, 12 years old)*

*-Yes.. older, older girls..but look at the middle school! Who wears a tracksuit?? (Mary, 12 years old)*

*-The twins!!! (just cited above as two childish losers)(big laugh)..(Je, 12 years old)*

This last assumption confirms Piacentini and Mailer's (2004) study results when they affirm that children, when choosing their products, are more concerned for other associations such as the "stereotypes of its typical user" than for the physical characteristics of the product itself.

During the focus group interviews, however, it emerged there are brands "allowed" even if they have been created for children and have logos with fantastic characters; above all, Hello Kitty and The Powerpuff Girls. The power of these brands resides in the aura of trendiness they were able to build around their characters. For example, Hello Kitty "is fashion" and girls of every age can get crazy for it; they desire clothes, purses, diaries and other objects of every kind, forgetting that at the beginning the brand was aimed at children. When I asked why they liked Hello Kitty and were so excited talking about it, even if at the same time they disdain other brands with fictional characters, the typical answers were "Hello Kitty is different", "Hello Kitty is Hello Kitty" , "Hello Kitty is in fashion today". It is the perception of a brand, as something accepted by their universe, that makes it appreciated and desired. The possession of such products do not marginalize them classifying them as "loser children", but rather it raises the tweens' image, it makes them feel cool and increases their belonging to their world. Once again, the perception of what fashion is, comes from noticing what happens around; these girls



are careful observers in order to find out what should be done and what should be avoided in order to raise their coolness and trendiness.

*-The Powerpuff Girls style is very beautiful. Because it's not for kids, it's the style that is in fashion now. (Tina, 13 years old)*

*-You like the style but if it were not in fashion you wouldn't wear it... You can't deny it! if you had to wear it when it wasn't in fashion, if nobody had it.. you wouldn't wear a Powerpuff Girls t-shirt! (Lily, 13 years old)*

*-Maybe.. (Tina, 13 years old)*

*-You wouldn't wear The Powerpuff Girls..(Giu, 13 years old)*

*-In my opinion the Powerpuff Girls is something very different from Winnie The Pooh, for example.. (Daly, 13 years old)*

*-Yes!! In fact Winnie The Pooh is for kids.. (Tina, 13 years old)*

*-Do you have any clothes branded Winnie The Pooh?*

*-(Chorus) Nooooo!*

### **6.3 Little women.. growing up**

When growing older, girls' interest towards boys, grows too. Most of the 11 year-old-girls, just arrived at the middle school, still consider boys as a separate world and are often more concerned with avoiding their spiteful tricks, such as lifting skirts up, rather than with any physical attraction towards them. Especially in the first years of middle school, girls perceive their class mates more childish both for their personality and for their image and they feel much more mature than them.

*"The boys of our class are quite retarded.. they have started wearing jeans this year!!!!". (Clau, 12 years old)*

However, a change occurs in tweens' perception of the opposite sex during the middle school years and this deeply impacts on how girls use their brands and products. When I asked them to mention a special occasion which requires special dressing, several girls answered me "a dinner with a guy", which probably are still dreaming of and waiting for; other girls replied "a birthday party or a party where there are interesting guys". The presence of "interesting" guys can influence the care they put in the choice of how to dress, the quantity of advice asked to friends and the time spent to get ready.

This attention to guys is another factor that testifies their increasing maturity and similarity with teenagers. During the focus group they took many pauses to talk about guys, for example when they met the boy of their heart the last time, and affirmed they hope to meet “him” when they go to the cinema or to the church.

When they decide how to dress on these special occasions, they look for products and brands that can emphasize their femininity and elegance, sometimes leaving the jeans that they have at school and preferring a dress or a skirt

*“If it were winter, I would wear a black dress, knee-length.. I bought it at Oviessa! If it were summer, I would wear a miniskirt and a top.. it’s hot in summer!” (Ade, 12 years old)*

Otherwise, if they want to be more comfortable, they can decide to wear a pair of jeans, but nicer than those usually worn at school.

This attention on how to dress and the desire of being noticed come from the awareness that also guys, especially if they are one or two years older, are interested in girls and pay attention to them and to how they appear.

*-Do you think that boys pay attention to your clothes?*

*All: ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..*

*-They look you up and down! (Ade, 12 years old)*

*-They look at your clothes. (Mary, 12 years old)*

*-Do they look at clothes?*

*-Yes.. (Je, 12 years old)*

*-I think at something else, too! (Silvy, 12 years old)*

*-Yes..I don’t think they care about clothes! (Fre, 12 years old)*

*-They care about how clothes fit on girls! (Ade, 12 years old)*

*-Yes indeed! (Fre, 12 years)*

Finally, these girls affirmed that, when they wear something, they are more concerned in making a good impression on guys than on girls. Sometimes, in addition to the opinions asked to their girl friends, they ask for suggestions to boys too. In fact, since they need to make a good impression on boys, they believe that asking for the opinion of the people directly concerned increases their chances of succeeding. However, this is still an exception, since many girls are not yet comfortable with asking advice to boys. Since they are quite naive in their role of seducers, they need as many confirmations as

possible in order to be more confident and to face this new situation in the best possible way. On this special occasion they even more need the approval of their friends in order to like themselves better and, as a result, to be more secure in front of the beloved guy. What they look for in their brands is elegance, class and, at the same time, they need to be comfortable too.

The need of appearing cool with guys and the importance given to brands and clothes in order to reach this goal did not deserve too much attention in the previous researches. It is worth noticing that these tween girls are still quite naïve in the way they talked about guys and in the way they like guys. It is a portrait of a girl different from the one made by Cook (2004) in his book. According to his opinion, girls are concerned in buying clothes that make them look older in order to become the “object of the sexual gaze”. He also talked about themes such as the commercial value of sex and the sexuality of young persons, themes that appear premature to be applied to the reality of these girls.

#### **6.4 Same friends, same brands**

It is probably exaggerated to state that tweens choose their friends according to the kind and the number of the brands they use. However, it emerges that inside the same group of friends, clothes and brands are similar and can be a variable through which in-groups evaluate other people and consider them as different and members of separate groups. This confirms Belk and his colleagues' (1984) assumption that sixth grade children (11-12 years old) use certain products and brand names to symbolize group identity and a sense of belonging to certain groups.

The girls I talked to were mostly regular girls and they gave me their overview of what I could find inside an Italian middle school.

There are three different kinds of reality: first of all, there is the group that for the purpose of this study I can call “Fashion slanderers”, still childish and easy victims of the mockery of other tweens, mostly behind their back. Secondly, there is the group of the “Fashion conscious”, whom they belong to. They really like brands which are very important to them and they have some branded clothes that are alternated with

unbranded ones. Finally, there are the “Fashion victims” dressed in branded clothes from head to toe.

It is worth underlining that this division is possible not only for a matter of aesthetic appearance and coolness (Belk *et al.*,1984; Jamison, 1996), but also because brands and products are often taken as reference points for making inferences about their owners’ character and personality.

#### *Fashion slanderers and Fashion victims*

“Fashion slanderers” still go to school dressed in Barbie and Winx. They have many colorful tracksuits, they like pink, purple and other sparkling colors. They are probably mentally closer to elementary school kids and to that period of life when the social meaning of dressing is not very defined in the mind of a child. They prefer playing games rather than going shopping or talking about it, they are not very interested in clothes, they are still childish and let their mothers decide for them. In this sense, the way of dressing reflects the personality and can explain that those who still like Barbie are closest friends to one another, because they share the same interests and attitudes and are not ready yet to leave their condition of children. They see their closest friends like them and they are all right.

Probably these girls are tweens only for their biological age. According to Siegel (2001) and his colleagues’ assumption that tween is a “state of mind” more than a matter of age, they cannot be considered as tweens. It is unlikely to find groups where there are “Fashion Slanderers” mixed with “Fashion Conscious” and the latter in particular are very careful about not blurring the boundaries between them.

The girls I talked to, cited “Fashion Slanderers” when they wanted to explain things they do not absolutely do and behaviors discordant with theirs.

For what concerns the mobile phones, they sometimes do not have it yet and this is likely to be linked to their family that treat them as children and consider them too young to own one.

“Fashion slanderers” are perceived by the other girls as a “dissociative reference group” (White and Dahl, 2006) and they carefully keep away from them.

At the opposite side there are those girls, which are dressed always in branded clothes and that I called “Fashion victims”. They obviously are part of very wealthy families, since at that age no one earns any money and the desire for branded products definitely has to pass through their parents’ approval and financial position.

Girls of this group can live their relationship with brands in two different ways. On the one hand, they can just like and wear their brands without boasting about. Their parents can afford such kind of stuff, they like it, but they do not think they are better than others just because they have more brands on their garments, or because their clothes are expensive and made by famous designers. In this case the relationship between “Fashion Conscious” and “Fashion Victims” is good and they can be mixed sometimes. Obviously through their way of dressing, they assure their image of being cool, they feel secure and trendy but at the same time they do not raise the antipathy of other girls.

On the other hand, this group comprehends girls who conspicuously behave in order to show off what they are wearing and make other people notice it. They seek “visibility” from the use of their brands (Grant and Stephen, 2005). They have big logos on their clothes, on their purses and even on their pants that accurately emerge from their trousers. These girls are those who more strongly have adopted the belief that “to have is to be” (Dittmar, 1992). At the eyes of other girls, their behavior can be seen as an attempt to stand out among the others but it underlines the insecurity they try to hide by wearing expensive clothes. Moreover, these girls build their group of friends and strengthen their image of coolness through the cohesiveness of the group and through the teasing of those out of the group. They are very close to one another and there are some implicit “clothing and brand codes” that must be respected in order to be inside the group; they consider people out of their group as losers and they do not want to mix up with them, preferring the company of other “Fashion Victims”. Once again the assumption that the possession of some product or brand symbolizes group identity and its belonging (Belk *et al.*, 1984) is confirmed. Previous literature did not point out that the need to stand out at all costs and the mockery of other people in order to appear better, could mean that they are not so secure of being that better, otherwise they would not behave in such a way. In addition, often, with their behavior they put up the opposite results, that is being criticized, considered unpleasant and snob.

-What about girls?(Those that they consider “Fashion victims”)  
 -Ohh.. they are terrible! (Lily, 13 years old)  
 -Usually they are like hyenas, like jealous hyenas! (Giu, 13 years old)  
 -Yes! I agree! (Lily, 13 years old)  
 -They are so unpleasant! (Bea, 13 years old)  
 -They are like vipers! Once, one of them looked at me, every inch of my body and then she said: “Mmh”. (Giu, 13 years old)  
 -They go out, with their miniskirts, their purses.. they look at other girls, turning up their noses.. (Lily, 13 years old)  
 -..and they also have the same hair style, the same fringe!(Giu, 13 years old)  
 -Yes.. And they stare at people on purpose, when they are with their friends. They look at other people, and say to their friends: ‘Look at this, look at that!’. Always with their miniskirts, their purses, always glued to their best friends, always with their branded clothes! (Lily, 13 years old)

*“I don’t want to say that every person who dresses with branded clothes is nasty or unpleasant.. maybe she just wants other people to notice them..and it’s ok! But however, most of the time, those who wear many brands are unpleasant!” (Bea, 13 years old)*

The affection for brands that this group demonstrates in their clothes choices is also reflected in the purchase of their mobile phones. They look for the last version of the coolest brand and they do not care about changing their mobiles, even if the previous one still works, if they see another one they like better. They are proud of showing their “amazing” mobiles and look conceited at those that are just “normal”. The reasons for this kind of behavior can be explained in the same way as for clothes.

The “Fashion Slanderers” and the “Fashion Victims” groups remain two exceptions in the bunch of tweenagers. The majority of girls, like all those interviewed for this study, can be considered as part of the “Fashion Conscious” group cited above. They are no more interested in Barbie and Winx and keep away from these very carefully; however, at the same time, they cannot afford to have only branded clothes in their wardrobe or they do not consider it necessary. Inside this group, girls live in different ways their relationship with brands and, since they directly talked about themselves, the findings are richer and deeper and are summed up in the following paragraph.

### *Fashion Conscious*

In this part, I am not going to use the term “Fashion Conscious” every time since it is implicit who I am talking about. I am going to generally refer to them as tweens or girls.

These girls are very competent about brands. Even if they do not own many branded clothes, they are perfectly aware of which brands can be found in the market, those aimed at a younger public and those addressed to the adult market. They know many products associated to the different brands, their prices, and the shops where they can eventually buy them. When they looked at the collage that I brought along for the interviews, they demonstrated to know almost every brand on it, with some exceptions for some children’s brands, and to be able to thoroughly talk about them. Tweens’ brand world is mostly made by adult brands and this depends both on reasons of size and on reasons of style. The former are easily supposed since some girls in middle schools already have a body like an adult’s; the latter are easy to imagine too, according to what previously affirmed about tweens’ attitude towards children’s brands and because also brands for 0-14 year-olds “*are still things for a child, just transformed for older people.. I don’t like them!!*” (Lily, 13 years old).

Some other girls may have the opposite problem; to be more precise, they would like to have adult branded clothes but they are still too short and thin to fit them.

*“I can only buy the smallest, smallest size for adults. Then if they are still too big I wait for a while and I wear them in the future, when they fit me..” (Ale, 11 years old)*

A good compromise, very appreciated by the tweens, are the “junior versions” of adults’ famous brands such as “Liu Jo Girl”, “Armani Junior” or “D&G Junior” which combine the prestige and the style of the brand with a good adaptability to their body.

However, the most widespread brands among the tweens are those aimed to the adults’ market but more oriented to and, therefore, appreciated by the teenager side, such as Paul Frank, Converse, Phard, Hello Kitty, Diesel and Miss Sixty. Even if it is likely to find these brands on adults too, tweens are those who really have a passion for them.

Even if tweens know and dream of many brands, their desires cannot always be translated into a purchase. Many of these beloved brands are not easily accessible to this segment since the price is too high. Parents do not agree to pay a large sum of money for an item of clothing that is likely not to fit their growing up children for more than one season. Girls revealed to be very conscious about prices for many different products and, when they talked, they revealed their consciousness about the impossibility to have every brand they would like to. Since many of the brands they like are very expensive, they have to choose among others which cost less.

*-I like branded clothes but I don't buy them often since my parents make me use my money to buy these kind of stuff..and I only have a certain amount of money. (Je, 12 years old)*

*-Yes, me too! I cannot ask my parents for only branded clothes! (Mary, 12 years old)*

Moreover, during the conversation they often gave examples of products' prices and knew the price range of the clothes they had. According to consumer socialization studies, pricing knowledge becomes more defined during the "reflective stage" and individuals start to view prices as function of the product's quality and consumer preferences (John, 1999). The girls interviewed were also very conscious about the premium price that consumers are required to pay to have brands and often they would be willing to pay for it or, better, to make their parents pay.

Other brands, in addition to this economic barrier, have a symbolic barrier to purchase which is even more difficult to be overcome. The competence of tweens depends also on their precocious interest in the high fashion brands and products they see in magazines and in stores; they know they are not suitable for them and that, even in case they had the money, they could not buy them. Dreaming these fashion brands is a way that helps them to feel more mature and it is a sort of "brick" in the construction of their adult self. In a certain way, they prepare themselves in the present time for when they will be finally "allowed" to wear that kind of things.

The same assertions are not valid for technology brands. First of all, in this market there is not a distinction among children's and adults' brands. Technology products have



been created for adults and nowadays they have become a fundamental element in children's lives too. Moreover, since for these products the notion that "brand means quality" is stronger, parents are more inclined to spend money on a good mobile phone or an mp3 reader that can last more time and provide greater performances.

*"It's different with clothes, I change clothes very often. Indeed, this laptop I bought..well, I'm not going to change it soon. You often buy new clothes and you change them.. The phone and the laptop are going to last longer and it's worth buying an expensive and good brand." (Je, 12 years old)*

Tweens can differently relate with their brands and respond to other desired brands' lack. Following, there is a presentation of different scenarios.

First of all, there are girls who serenely deal with the consciousness that there are some brands that they cannot have yet. They like to look in the magazines, they suggest clothes to their mothers and already dream about their future using mother's high heels at home, just for fun. These are probably the younger of the age range considered. They are all right with the things they have, even if they have few branded clothes in their closet; their priority is to have trendy garments to feel good in, to feel comfortable and to be appropriate to the school environment where they wear them. These tweens are not worried if their clothes have been bought at the open market, or if they are cheap and with a brand name that no one knows. They prefer quantity to quality and prefer to have many trendy clothes (no matter about the brand) rather than few famous branded ones.

*"I don't care about the brand, it's not worth spending a lot of money for a pair of jeans that you can find at.. for example, 15 euros!" (Vale, 11 years old)*

*"In my opinion, if the brand is not very famous, but the shape of the dress is nice, it can suit you very well too!!" (Je, 12 years old)*

In this case also their collages, where they presented fashionable and fancy products, confirmed the same. There were no evident brand names on them and these girls could not provide any further explanation about the brand of the products selected. Moreover, their collages were rich of popular actresses and singers they would like to be similar to. Also in this case, even if they like their style very much, they did not go in depth into the

discussion. In fact, they are aware of being still too young to have the same look and for this reason they do not even desire this kind of clothes.

Also in case they have branded products, clothes but also shoes or sunglasses, my perception was that they do not care too much about the popularity of the brand, neither before nor after the purchase.

*“When I went to buy my sunglasses, at the optician’s, I saw them, I liked them but I didn’t even realize they were of that brand. It’s not written on them. I read it later, at home, on their box.” (Cleo, 12 years old)*

Moreover, when I asked these girls to list five attributes of a product (fabric, print, brand, price and color) according to their importance, they listed “brand” in one of the last rows. Also the way they talked confirmed this impression, as if they were talking about something that did not concern their world. Sometimes, at first, they could not even remember which brands they had. The lack of brands is really not a problem and they do not long for the moment they will have more. The fact they do not give too much importance to possess famous and expensive brands, is reflected in the fact that they are not influenced in any way by peers having more.

When I asked them about mobile phones and mp3 readers, the attitude was the same. They stressed the importance of quality and functionality over aesthetics and design, and did not have much more to say.

Overall, during the focus group they were less talkative than the others and they often waited for me to address them directly before expressing their opinion, as if they did not have much to say about, compared to the other girls, more involved in the conversation.

A completely diverse attitude is that of other different tween girls who live relationships with brands, and their lack, in a sort of conflict. Their desire for brand is high, they love brands, they like to talk about clothes and the latest fashion trends and they are very attentive to what their peers have and what is cooler. They look in magazines and in shop windows and they both aspire to the coolest brands for teenagers and are seduced by adults’ high fashion brands. However, for the reasons explained above,

they know they cannot have all the brands they wish to have. This desire can be higher when girls have older sisters and see them have the same clothes they aspire to; however, since they are still growing up, parents do not agree to spend the same sum of money for them too.

*“Well..I really like branded stuff. For example, I love trousers of a brand called Dondup! I like them so much.. but they cost..better not say how much they cost..they are very expensive! Indeed, my sister has them, because she’s older than me. Phew!” (Iaia, 11 years old)*

Another case is when girls have close friends who have many branded clothes. They envy them in a certain way, and when they visit them, they check out their wardrobe, try their clothes on, and this raises the desire of having them too. Moreover, they admit that sometimes, to see everyone around wearing brands, makes them feel inadequate and they significantly regret their lack of the same brands. These girls probably have an innate propensity for this kind of stuff but surely the social contest in which they live amplifies it.

The same can happen for the technology as it is very well explained by Je in talking about her mp3 reader:

*“I had an anonymous mp3 reader until no long time ago. I bought the Ipod for my Confirmation, with my money. My parents absolutely didn’t agree with my choice and they said to me “You have the mp3 reader and it works well!”. But I saw them (friends) having the Apple Ipod and..it worked very well..and they told me it was very good and I wanted the Ipod as well! Moreover, my mp3 reader didn’t work, or at least, I have never understood (wanted to understand) how to use it.” (Je, 12 years old)*

These girls are very attentive when they go to the shops and look around for prices and models to raise their consumer knowledge and to be updated on the last trends. It is interesting to notice that these girls do not renounce their beloved brands but patiently agree to wait until it is the right moment to buy them.

To satisfy their desire for brands and compensate for their absence at the present time, they try to surround themselves with other objects that can make them feel closer to the brand, despite the lack of possession of clothes not accessible to them. These girls buy

school materials of their favorite brands, since these products are cheaper than clothes, or else they use the bags of the shops as a purse.

*“...and I have a purse of Liu Jo (her favourite brand).. but.. It is the bag..well, I will explain it to you: When you go shopping in the Liu Jo store and you buy a t-shirt, they give you the Liu Joe shopping bag which is like a purse. Well, they give it to you for free .. but it is a purse. Most of the girls use it as a purse and I do it as well. Unfortunately it was my step-mum who bought the t-shirt.” (Ade, 12 years old)*

These girls are those who are more interested in the high fashion brands such as Prada, Dolce&Gabbana, Gucci. They already dream about their future nice dresses even if they know these are not adequate for their age. However, to overcome this symbolic barrier, they have two options: to aspire to an item of clothing of their “Junior” collections or their second lines, otherwise they can move their aspiration towards other products of the same brands such as purses, sunglasses and accessories. Anyway, the economic barrier remains because these product categories are expensive as well. Some girls admit they would be content also with buying counterfeited products. The important is that others do not understand that this is counterfeited. In this attitude it is implied their willingness to have great brands in order to be cool to the eyes of other peers (Elliot and Leonard, 2004).

*-If I'm sure they wouldn't realize, if they didn't realize it's fake...I would get it ...then I'd say it's branded.. (Je, 12 years old)*  
*-They wouldn't check the label inside. (Marty, 12 years old)*

For these girls the “Fashion victims” group can be considered as a “positive reference group” (Park and Lessig, 1977), at least the “nicest” part of it. In fact, they regard that group as being made of cool people, since they are trendy and able to catch the attention of their peers. According to the different definitions of influences given by Park and Lessig (1977), “Fashion victims” exert an informational influence on “Fashion conscious”. From the simple observation of and conversation with them, they can learn about how to better choose products in order to make a good impression on other people. Moreover “Fashion victims” exert a value-expressive influence: tweens feel that,

if they wear something like them, they can be perceived cool and admired as well, since they consider them as possessing these characteristics they would like to have too.

Finally, there are girls that, even if they pay attention to brands, do not want to admit the importance of brands in their life and their desire of having more branded clothes.

This attitude is reflected in the fact that they severely criticize those who pay too much attention to brands and in particular they consider those who wear too many branded items as lacking in personality. In the attempt to live better the fact that they cannot have all the brands they desire, they degrade those who have more. They affirm that those who want to appear cool and gain notoriety only through the use of expensive brands are probably appreciated and noticed in the present but do not have any hope to maintain the same success in the future too. To affirm one's own personality there are other ways which go beyond the brand and wearing the same clothes as everyone else. They pretend to affirm that unbranded clothes are better in expressing their personality because they are more various and one can be free to choose what really suits her personality and style.

Moreover, when I directly asked them if they care about brands, the first answer was "I don't!". However, later in the focus group discussion, it emerged their possession of many trendy branded products and that, actually, if they have to choose between a branded pair of jeans, for example, and an unbranded one, the preference is evidently for the branded one. At the same time, they continuously stress that it is not because of the brand but because they like the model, decrying the choice of a brand as a consequence of the choice of the model. This could also be true, but it is the way in which they reinforced their point of view so many times and the contradiction with the number of brands they possess that made me think they were not totally true and they just tried hard to appear immune to the brands' charm in order to face their lack better. Evidently, these girls are very critical towards the group of "Fashion victims", and refer to them as what I define as a "dissociative reference group" (White and Dahl, 2006) of vain and arrogant girls they want to keep off. I think that also the determination through which they want to affirm this separation implies, once again, a kind of jealousy and a contradictory aspiration.

This section's aim was to contribute to a more detailed description of the relationship between tweens and brands, from different points of view, providing further understanding of the phenomenon when compared to other previous researches (e.g. Grant and Stephen, 2005; Piacentini and Mailer, 2005).

### **6.5 Peers' influences and interaction**

The relevance of peers in influencing products and brands consumption of children and tweens has been widely discussed in the previous literature (e.g. Ward, 1974; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Brittain, 1963; Bachmann *et al.* 1993; Roper and Shah, 2007; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004). This section offers a further contribute to two specific aspects of peers' dynamics.

#### *Diversity in similarity*

The girls interviewed revealed an ambivalence in their speeches. In fact, they have to follow two opposite tendencies: the former is to be unique, having their own personal style, that is, a unique style able to differentiate them from others; they often consider style as a way through which they can express their personality. The latter tendency leads to conformation since their "unique personal style" must be found inside the boundaries set by "peers' codes" which are narrow but need to be respected in order to get the peers' acceptance. This is what Gray (2006) called "Collective individualism".

It is not uncommon to find tween girls dressed in the same way, with the same brands, clothes and logos on.

An example I saw with my eyes was during the fifth focus group, while I was with six 12 year-old girls, three out of six wearing the same sweater, branded Paul Frank with its famous logo representing the head of a monkey. Since I was curious, I asked them why they were wearing the same sweater. First of all, they immediately clarified that it was accidental; secondly, two of them affirmed they had bought it for first; once I found out who really was the first, the other underlined the fact she did not copy on purpose while the third easily admitted she had copied her friend.

The copying of brand and clothes is very common; sometimes it is direct, meaning that girls see a close friend with a brand they like, feel the desire to have the same and finally buy it. They do not think that there is something deplorable in doing so, until these identical products are not used in the same moment. This attitude can be explained, sometimes, by the fact that, at that age, not every girl is already able to decide her style by herself, therefore these prefer to copy friends to be sure of making the right choices. Some other times girls may copy their friends because they are jealous of seeing someone else having more than them and not necessarily because they have a real interest in the brand. This bothers more the girls who have been copied.

Some other times, girls do not expressly copy a friend and the possession of the same products can be explained by the fact that many other people around own the same things. In this way some objects become so common that one starts to like them because they are widespread while she would not buy them if she were the only one.

*"I used to see them (Converse tennis shoes) around, also when I used to go downtown..Many girls had them on and I started to like them. When I was even younger, I didn't like them that much. Their shape... just a little bit, and I had never bought them. Then, at the last year of elementary school I decided to try them, I got used to them and now I always wear Converse tennis shoes!"  
(Clau, 12 years old)*

In addition, since tweens are very attentive to what happens around, it is likely that more than one notice the tendency and end up buying the same things, as it happens for the two girls cited above.

Otherwise, since tweens discuss with their friends about products and brands, they can form similar positive opinions about the same things and in a second moment, more than one buy the things they talked about before.

In these two last examples tweens are very kind in affirming that they buy according to their preferences, not to others'.

Tweens can have different emotional responses towards other girls who have the same products and brands. Firstly, girls can perceive it with a sense of gratification because, if

someone else has decided to purchase the same clothes, this means that this person likes what her friend owns; this is another way through which a girl can raise her social and peers' acceptance. For this reason, girls do not complain and, unless they go out together with the same things on, like two clones, they even appreciate the fact.

On the contrary, girls can be irritated if someone else has garments identical to theirs and can expressly ask not to buy the same. In fact, many people dressed in the same way compromise one important function of brands and clothing: to express individuals' personality. These girls are particularly annoyed when they realize that someone else copies them on purpose.

*"If someone copies me on purpose.. surely.. it bothers me! Because she steals my personality!" (Ale, 11 years old)*

On the contrary, when it happens accidentally they can turn a blind eye to this.

Sometimes they are particularly bothered if someone they do not like has the same clothes on, a little less when it is the case of a close friend. Finally, they do not want losers to copy them and the reason is well explained by Ade:

*"If one of the losers copies me, I'm very disappointed! Not because she bought the same thing that I have but because I think: 'Oh my God, now I dress like them!!'." (Ade, 12 years old)*

As previously affirmed, the group of "Fashion Slanderer" is considered as a "dissociative reference group" (White and Dahl, 2006). At the same time these girls do not want to become a "positive reference group" (Park and Lessig, 1977) for them.

To conclude, tweens appear disappointed by this conformation of tastes among friends. In fact, even if wearing one of the widespread brands gives assurance of being properly dressed, this is in contrast with the attempt of getting their unique style. Moreover, this reduces the prestige of the brand itself which, also in the tweens' mind, is inversely linked to the number of people who possess it.



*-At the beginning, those trousers (Roy Rogers) could be worn also for important events. But after a while..so many people had them.. (Maddy, 11 years old)*

*-..that they became banal! (Ciaci, 11 years old)*

*-Yes.. And now I always wear them, even to go to school! (Maddy, 11 years old)*

Despite this, they can hardly escape from this mechanism of conformation. This has been confirmed also by the fact that the girls who took part in the same focus group had homogeneity of brand preferences and could give many examples of products that they have in common.

#### *The necessity of friends' consent*

The conflict between "To like oneself" and "to be liked by others", together with comments among girls, are now taken into account as another demonstration of the relevance of peers' influence in tweens' life.

Tweens, on the one hand, affirm that the most important thing is to like oneself and not to care about what other people say.

*"Honestly, I don't care at all if they don't like how I am dressed! I have to like how I'm dressed! Not they! (Lily, 11 years old)*

But on the other hand they actually ask for their friends' opinion, before and after the purchase, before and after dressing to go out. Also in this case, to appear careless of what others say can be seen as a psychological mechanism they use to feel stronger and raise their self confidence, in order to create a sort of immunity from bad comments. Before the purchase, positive and negative opinions shared with friends can influence the future choices of brands and products. Talking with them is a way to build their market knowledge and helps them to make better choices. To know the point of view of other friends, especially when it is in accordance with their own, is a way to be reassured of making a good choice.

After the purchase opinions are widespread. First of all, there are comments made by close friends. Positive comments are very welcomed and gratify the owner of the product, raising her self-confidence. When girls have to decide how to dress for a

special event, where they are more concerned in appearing cool, they take into special account the products which received positive comments about. When tweens have something new they do not always explicitly ask friends about the new purchase as they know that their watchful eye will notice it immediately.

*-If I have something new, and no one notices it, at the end of the day I ask: "Do you like this??" (Ade, 12 years old)*

*-But usually we notice it! (Je, 12 years old)*

*-Yes.. (Silvy, 12 years old)*

*-We make it to be noticed (Ade, 12 years old)*

*-That pair of shoes that I bought last month..everyone told me: "What great shoes!". And I thought: 'Wow, they immediately noticed them'." (Ade, 12 years old)*

Towards the negative comments they have a different attitude. If they are made by close friends, they take them into account even if it is unlikely they stop wearing the object of the criticism. Only few of them admitted they had stopped wearing something after a negative opinion.

*"I bought a dress, it is large in the upper part and then tighter in the lower part, it is not so beautiful..However, they told me 'Immediately go and take that thing off! It seems you are wearing a garbage bag!..' and since that moment I have never wanted to wear it again!" (Sofy, 11 years old)*

However, among close friends, it is not very easy for criticism to arise after the purchase. In fact, many girls affirmed that when they do not like something bought by a friend they prefer not to say a word to her. In this case; if the friend asks them directly they do not feel like saying "I don't like it!" but they prefer to answer with an insipid "nice!" to avoid any kind of hurt.

If others, who are not close friends, dare to negatively remark about how they are dressed, they affirmed to not pay attention to what they say. They perceive it as "gratuitous wickedness" and often react with the same kind of criticism.

*-What do you think about a girl that makes a negative comment about you?*

*-It depends on who this girl is! (Marty, 12 years old)*

*-One who is not a close friend..*

*-I tell her: Think about yourself (Marty, 12 years old)*

*-I don't care.. If she looks at me with a bad face, I look at her with the same face! (Mary, 12 years old)*

Tween girls' life is not easy and if the relationship among friends can be very close, at the same time there can be rivalries with those who are out of their group. During the focus group, I have heard them calling other girls "vipers" or "hyenas" or in other not really polite ways. This behavior makes them closer to the "teen age" group: here competition and rivalry among girls, in order to decide who the coolest is and who is noticed the most, is even higher.

*"I know some girls, they are real vipers and they criticize 'You are not in fashion, you are not in fashion at all!'. First of all, everyone has her own personality, then, we have to dress as we like. Not according to this or that..we have to chose according to our personality!" (Lily, 13 years old)*

## **6.6 Mother and daughter**

Tween girls have a good relationship with their mothers, however this has considerably changed if compared to elementary school years.

The importance of the family as an influencing agent on children consumer socialization is well recognized (e.g. Grossbart and Crosby, 1984; Feltham, 1998), but this influence changes over time. Family influences are generally more important than those of peer groups in early childhood, while the influence of parents declines as children grow up (Ward, 1974).

In fact, during elementary school, mothers mostly choose the products and brands suitable to their daughters, they usually go shopping alone and children check products when they bring them home. Also during elementary school, girls can refuse to wear some particular items of clothing such as skirts or blouses but this remains an exception to the rule. Mothers are a strong socialization agent in the consumer socialization process of their kids and their influence on the final choice of how to dress is huge.

Moreover, during the tween age, girls' knowledge of some high fashion brands is strictly related to the possession of these brands by their mothers and to the interest that mothers have in such products. Sometimes tweens can go shopping with and for their mothers, visiting also expensive shops where there are no products for them. Also in

this case, the role of mothers as socialization agents emerges, together with their role in the daughters' acquisition of skills and knowledge.

When girls grow up they start to develop their personal tastes, that are shaped by their interaction with peers and by the personal reading of magazines. This does not always coincide with their mothers' taste. Tweens would like to detach themselves from the influence of their mothers and become independent in their choices. Girls want to have the last word on the final decision and when mothers do not agree, these are sharply silenced and often also criticized about their tastes.

*"My mum tries..she says: 'Wear this, wear that!'. But it is useless saying this, since I wear the way I want!". (Lily, 13 years old)*

It does not mean that, becoming tweens, girls stop every kind of interactions with their mothers. Some of them still really care about their mother's opinions and often ask for her impressions. Curiously, one of the girls interviewed firstly affirmed that she cannot let her mother choose for her because she is often wrong, then she said:

*"I really care about my mum's opinions..if my mum doesn't like something, I don't wear it!" (Sofy, 11 years old)*

In fact, this implies a previous personal choice. Girls perceive their mother not as a normative agent that decides on their behalf, but, on the contrary, they consider them on the level of a peer. They are more in a relationship "friend-friend" than "mother-child". They trust their mothers and also need their approval. This is even strengthened when the mother's tastes are perceived in line with their own. It is the only case when also clothes bought without the daughter's supervision can be welcomed.

Concerning fashion brands and products, the concept of "reverse socialization" can be introduced. In previous researches, little attention has been paid to this concept, meaning "processes by which children may influence their parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to consumption" (Ward, 1974, p.12). After tweens have conformed to their peers, they can decide to convey the acquired information to their mothers. This in turn can influence their consumption and decision making. Tweens affirmed, very

proudly, that their mothers ask them for advice and they often suggest them suitable products and brands. In particular, they are very proud to affirm that their mothers take their opinion into account more than what they do with their husband's .

Moreover, there is a role that mothers still have to hold, that is going shopping with them. In fact, as it emerged in the discussion, these tweens rarely go shopping alone with their friends, even if they desire it. Actually, either they do not have their parents' permission to go out alone, or they have it but when they go to the shops with friends or an older sister, they go and just have a look. They do not feel comfortable in carrying with them too much money and are not totally conscious of how much money they are allowed to spend.

*-Would you like to go shopping with your friends?*

*-Yes! Sure! But I don't know if I would be able to control my money. (Sofy, 11 years old)*

*-Me too..my budget.. (Ale, 11 years old)*

*-I would go into a shop and buy everything! (Sofy, 11 years old)*

To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning that parents, both mothers and fathers, have more influence on the final choice as far as the purchase of technology products is concerned. Since it is recognized to them a higher expertise, tweens often let them decide on their behalf. Despite the huge importance given to their peers as referents in the choices of clothes, girls remain flexible in using different information sources, favoring peers and friends for some type of products and parents for others (Moschis and Moore 1976).

## **7. Managerial implications**

On the basis of the findings presented in the previous chapter, this section will provide some suggestions that companies and retailers could take into account to better address tween girls. It is worth keeping in mind what they want from their brands and products: to be perceived as young girls, no more as children; to fit in with the social

contest they live in; to create a cool, trendy and fashionable image of themselves; to be unique, accepted by their peers and appreciated by boys.

Tweens are building their new image and new role in the world and need to overcome the sense of uncertainty typical of their age. For this reason, they need to feel important, to feel precious members of the world and deserve something specifically aimed at them.

Tween girls need fashion brands specifically thought for them in order to state their own personality. For this reason, if a fashion company tries to satisfy this segment with a brand covering the age ranging from 0 to 16/18, this would be unquestionably wrong. In fact, such a brand, suitable for a child of the kindergarten too, would be perceived as a brand for children by a tween girl, despite the existence of sizes that could perfectly fit her body. According to what explained in the previous chapter, it is likely she would not show any interest in this brand.

For an existent children fashion company which would like to effectively target tween girls too, the best solution is to create an entirely new brand, specifically aimed at this customer segment, and totally independent from the original corporate brand. The creation of a totally new brand can be a good solution also for adults' fashion companies; a strategy of sub-branding, where the new brand is combined with the corporate brand, is otherwise advisable too.

Logo and brand name must be chosen carefully. It is recommended to avoid puppets or multicolour writing in the logo, since they are perceived as childish and can make a brand undesirable, as explained in the findings. Moreover, for the choice of the brand name it is better to keep away from sweet names or other fanciful names that may recall toys and therefore, once again, children. The brand name should, on the contrary, evoke elegance, style and glamour.

The need to feel important can also be fulfilled also through the way the sales departments are set up. Obviously, to have an entire shop where they could find only products for them would be the best solution ever. However, when this is not possible, a specific area inside the shop, where tweens can find all their products, could be a very

good compromise. If the shop is big, the greatest thing would be the existence of an entire floor just for tweens. I suggest not the first, but the second floor. In this way, while they go up the stairs they feel they are about to enter their own space where adults, who stop on the first floor, do not pass by. When they arrive at their floor, its atmosphere should be perceivably different from the one of the other areas in the shop. This can be perceived through the clothes of the shop assistants, not too serious and very trendy, the furniture, the colour of the walls and the pictures on them. Gaiety and vitality should be perceived around. When the shop sells to boys too, it is advisable to separate the two parts. In the “girls’ part” the shop assistants should be girls, since not every tween is totally comfortable when asking advice to someone of the opposite sex about how she looks like. The fitting rooms must have many mirrors, as most girls stated during the interviews, and I suggest the presence of some comfortable armchairs in front. In this way mothers can sit and patiently wait for their daughters while they try new clothes on, since, as they explained, they usually need a lot of time before the final choice.

Finally, besides the opportunity of buying clothes there should be that of finding accessories too, in the same area. A fashion brand aimed at tweens should also produce purses and accessories because tweens revealed a broad interest in having their beloved brands printed on these objects too.

It is worth noticing that this specific “tweens’ space” should not be inside a children’s shop; it would be useless since a tween would not even cross the door of such a store. It is advisable for it to be inside an adults’ shop so, when tweens go shopping with their mothers, they have their own spaces where they are free of walking around and are not forced to follow mothers in their shopping tours.

Now, I would like to consider a hypothetical new brand created for tween girls. The suggestions I provide could be adopted by a single company to promote this new brand through different initiatives; however, these ideas can be easily taken separately and used by companies, either to promote a new brand or to relaunch existent ones in case they are not yet perceived as appealing ones by this consumer segment.

### *The web site*

A good way to make a brand known by this target market is through the use of the Internet, since tween girls actively use the computer and surf the net. To be more precise, the fashion company should create a web site where the different items could be examined by its visitors. Thus far, nothing new has been made up. The additional component I suggest for this web site is the opportunity of interacting with it. Before explaining how, it is worth mentioning that tweens showed interest in using interactive fashion games such as “Nintendo Fashion Designer” and in playing on the website “stardoll.com”. In both cases they play by dressing a doll, choosing different clothes and accessories for various events, and, with “Nintendo Fashion Designer”, they can personalize these items using different colours, patterns and tissues.

Therefore, the idea that came up to my mind is to create a website, managed by the fashion company, where girls can play with real clothes (produced by the company) rather than with fictional ones. Moreover, instead of dressing a doll just for fun, they can use it to actively think about how they would like to be dressed in the real world.

The brand should not be linked only to a product category (e.g. t-shirts or jeans); in this way girls are able to entirely dress their doll with the products of the company. They can choose among t-shirts, sweaters, pulls, trousers and shoes. In addition, they can decide among different variants of the same product and personalize it. Tweens can choose among a certain set of predefined colours (in order to increase the feasibility, the company can set in advance a certain range of colours, avoiding a priori pastel ones that are not appreciated because considered for children). Moreover, tweens can modify the basic model, like add a hood or choose a V-neck instead of a round one in a sweater, and choose among different prints. Also in this case, for a matter of feasibility, the print selection cannot be too wide; to strengthen the image of the brand it is advisable to find some images that can become identifying symbols for it. The print can be either the brand logo, or another drawing that, even if different from the logo itself, must become connected to the brand in the consumer’s mind, as it happened for Snow White’s seven dwarfs and Fix Design, a well known brand among Italian tweens. It is probably very hard to reproduce in reality the same number of variants that tweens have



in their games, however, in this way they have the chance of personalizing their clothes more than with an ordinary brand.

Therefore, girls, at home, in front of their computers, can interact with the website and create their “models”, personalizing and combining clothes according to their preferences. By doing this at home, they can take advantage of the supervision and interaction of friends that, as explained in the previous chapter, are not usually present in shops during the purchase.

Moreover, girls can print their “model”, go to the shop (the list of points of sale where the brand can be found is on the web site) and ask for what she previously decided. Clearly, in the shop they can try different sizes and choose the most suitable for them. It may happen that the shop does not have, at that moment, clothes that perfectly match the model made at home; it should guarantee, at least, to have the basic model in every size so that girls can find their size in every case and then order the desired variant throughout the shop.

On the web site, prices should be indicated; in this way girls can find a deal with their mothers before going shopping and, if necessary, they have more time to bargain with them in the quiet of their houses. Since some mothers are very strict and hard to convince, in the shop girls have fewer chances of turning a “No” into a “Yes” than at home.

For sure, the objective of the company is to raise web site and brand’s popularity also through the word-of-mouth among friends. However, even if many friends decide to finally purchase the same brand, they have the opportunity to choose among different variants and create the model at home with their friends’ supervision before the purchase. This can prevent friends from making the exact same choice, guaranteeing each one’s individuality and uniqueness.

Moreover, since girls stress the importance of having their own style as a means to express their personality, this interactive construction of their style raises their perception of having personally contributed to it and they really perceive it as their own.

The idea of this web site has several other advantages. First of all, the creation of the “model” can be a funny way through which girls can ask a Christmas or birthday present to their relatives. Since they consider adults not able to properly choose on their behalf,

girls can prevent them from making mistakes, indicating very clearly what they want. Adults do not waste money in something which girls refuse to wear and girls are sure to appreciate the gift. Secondly, the creation of a connection between game and reality, can be a way for raising the interest in the purchase of clothing also for those girls that are not yet really involved in the topic. Finally, since girls entirely dress the doll, they are motivated to buy more than one item at the same time and to connect the brand to more than one product category, while during the interviews they proved to have a different favourite brand in each product category.

To conclude this section, it is worth remembering that some tween girls, even if mentally young, still have a child's body. For this reason, even if these products are not aimed at children, the company should take into account the demand of these girls and make smaller sizes of their products. In fact, what certainly must be avoided is making a tween girl create her model at home, go to the shop very excited and, once there, not make her find a size suitable for her. She may feel betrayed by the brand which did not care about her needs; this can generate a sort of frustration and denial towards the brand persisting also when she is developed enough to fit bigger sizes.

### *The personal stylist*

Another good idea for raising the interest towards a brand is hiring in the shop (when there is a considerable amount of products of this brand or, even better, in case of a mono-brand store) a special member of the shopping staff that I call "personal stylist". As emerged during the focus groups, tween girls do not trust shop assistants since they consider them more concerned in selling rather than in really advising on what is more suitable. The "personal stylist", hired by the brand company and working inside the shop, should be a person, I suggest a girl, with a higher level of expertise than the "regular" shop assistants and with a certificate in fashion subjects. The personal stylist should not be confused with other shop assistants doing activities such as staying at the desk or tidying up the shop, or at least not when clients are around. The girls can trust the personal stylist because they perceive her expertise in fashion and do not consider her as working for the shop, even if in practice she does. Girls should consider the

existence of this person as a special service offered by the brand to its consumers. To maintain a perception of exclusivity of the service, the “personal stylist” should work in the shop only in some moments, not every day for the whole day. These periods, in practice, should coincide with the moments when girls can go shopping, such as afternoons and all day long on Saturdays (in the latter case it would be all day long, since some schools are closed on this day). The “personal stylist” is associated only to one brand and its products, for this reason the best scenario would be a mono-brand store where she could use every shop’s item for her advice.

The advantages coming from the existence of this figure are numerous and are likely to raise tween girls’ interest in the brand. First of all, not every tween is totally able to create her own style; those who cannot decide by themselves often end up copying their friends. Therefore, the personal stylist can help these girls to understand and shape their style without copying other friends.

Moreover, the “personal stylist” is perceived as somebody for adults and for famous people; for this reason, also those more confident in their competences about clothes and brands can like the idea of interacting with her. In tweens’ imagination this opportunity can make them feel more important and closer to the beloved singer and actress they would like to be similar to.

This idea can be linked to the previous one. When a girl, who has created her “model” at home, goes to the shop, can ask this expert’s opinion in order to have additional confirmation of making the right choice and to increase her self-esteem.

### *The competition*

I am now going to explain another idea, linked to the first one, that can encourage the purchase of a particular brand. As previously suggested, girls can conceive their “models” at home and then visit the shop. If they finally purchase the same things of the “model” created before, they can take part in a competition internal to the shop. The winner, that is, the best “model” in terms of style and clothes’ combination, will deserve its own dummy in the shop window for the following week. This can be very stimulating for the girls that put all their efforts in order to create the best “model”. If they win, they get an evident confirmation of being really cool. Moreover, the judge in the competition

could be the personal stylist; this could raise tweens' self-confidence even more since their merit is underlined by a person with expertise and whose opinion is highly taken into account by other peers too. The girls who win can feel stronger towards the bad comments of other girls, since they have received an important confirmation of their good taste. It is a good reason not to care about what other girls say. Finally this can raise other peers' acceptance and make them a valid referent point when friends need suggestions for clothes.

The word-of-mouth about the competition can quickly increase the curiosity among tweens and it is likely for them to meet at home in the afternoon and spend time together thinking about new "models" and the possibility of winning. They look forward to having their mothers' permission for a visit to the shop.

From the company and the retailer's point of view, this idea can raise the interest in the brand and in the shop. Moreover, since the chance of participating in the competition is linked to the final purchase of all the clothes of the model, girls are more motivated in buying different items of the same brands at the same time.

### *Mobile phones*

Concerning mobile phones, I do not think it is worthy to create a brand exclusively aimed at this target. Firstly, tweens affirmed to like changing their mobiles and often they have the opportunity when parents purchase a new cell phone for themselves. On this occasion, they beg for the new purchase and offer to swap their old one with it. Therefore, if they want their parents to accept the exchange, the mobile needs to fit their parents' tastes too. Secondly, the mobile phone is a thing for adults and for this reason its possession makes them feel more mature and responsible. Therefore, it is not worthy to blur the image of adulthood around the object. Finally, they like to personalize their mobiles, through stickers or pendants, and this is their way to be original and cool. The possibility of finding decorations linked to brands can be very attractive for girls. When they perceive a brand as cool, they can be willing to use its accessories to make their mobiles cooler and more trendy.

My idea, which can be connected to the previous ones, is the possibility of creating stickers with the same image of the brand logo (or the print mentioned above) and, at

the same time, that of personalizing them according to the girls' personal tastes. In the same shops or shop areas described above, there could be the option of creating these stickers with proper machines. These can be printed in many sizes, to fit the back of different models of mobile phones, and can be easily removed without damaging the cover where they were attached. Next to the image, tweens can also add a small writing, and this gives the opportunity to friends to make similar stickers with the name of their group, if they are part of one, or with their first name. As it emerged from the focus groups, very close friends like to be part of small groups created and named by themselves. Once again, girls are given the opportunity to have something fashionable with their personal touch on the final result.

Finally, the existence of these machines in the shop can increase the likelihood of a tour inside. Tweens, can enter the store to create their stickers and buy something even when they do not have the opportunity to spend money on clothes; for example, when they do tours in the city centre with friends (those who are allowed to do that) and are without their parents, who still are the only backers of their clothes' purchases.

## **8. Conclusions**

This work, through a qualitative analysis based on five focus groups, contributed to have an insight into the complex tween world and, in particular, into their relationship with brands. The results, grouped in six different themes, gave an overview about what stays behind their choices of brands and products. The use of a qualitative approach allowed to gain a deeper understanding of their real needs. Tween girls use their brands and products to affirm their new image of middle school students. Arriving at the new school they need to detach their image from the one of the child they were until a short time before. Being properly dressed and possessing the right brands is fundamental to be cool, to gain peers' acceptance and preserve their self esteem. Girls are very brand conscious but not everyone has the same attitude toward brands, concerning both the kind of brands and the number of branded products owned. To a certain extent, this can also lead to the formation of different groups among tweens. These girls have different perceptions of people who belong to different groups, wishing either to aspire to be a

member of them, or to remain separate from them. Tweens use their brands to build their femininity since during middle school they also start to pay attention to boys. The interaction with peers resulted to be both direct and indirect. Indirect interaction means that the conformation to peers' rules, such as clothing and brand codes, present in the environment wherein they live, is perceived to be important to follow in order to get social acceptance. Moreover tweens are influenced directly by their peers who express their opinions before and after purchases. Girls appear concerned in affirming their own unique identity and independence in the product choices. They hardly admit the influences exerted by their friends that often modify their attitude and choices. Even if peers were the main focus of this work, a presentation about the relations between mother and tweens was due. In fact, at that age, even if peers shape tweens' brand preferences, the final brand purchase still depends on parents.

These findings are useful to managers and retailers who want to address tween girls. Moreover, the section of managerial implications presents some ideas through which it is possible to raise girls' interest towards brands, having products and shops which respond to their needs and exigencies.

The study claims many suggestions and insights, despite the limitations it entails.

In fact, due to time and geographical constraints, the study is limited to the choice of Italy as the country of study. Italy is a relatively small country, with several and relevant differences among different areas of its territory. Furthermore, most of the focus groups have been employed in small towns, which in the fragmented Italian scenario might bias the perception of brands with respect to metropolis. Thereby, further research should consider the phenomenon in bigger cities or make a comparison with different countries. The study is also limited in the size of the sample, which is not representative, and the age range considered is very narrow. This implies a deeper understanding of the sample analyzed, but still entails limits in inferring on a wider basis. This work relies only on qualitative methodology of research and the results have been analyzed only by one person. This is a limit, to some extent, since only my personal interpretation of facts has been considered. Further qualitative research could be undertaken with older teenage

girls as well as triangulation employing quantitative research and involving more than one researcher.

A powerful means of analysis of such research topic could be the usage of blogs, internet-based forum in which people exchange their thoughts and impressions about different subjects. This might be a valid tool to be employed in the triangulation above mentioned.

Finally, to understand the relations among tweens and brands, the study may be limited by the use of only two product categories. Subtle hints of a consistent interest towards entertainment and travelling have emerged chatting with the interviewees during the focus groups. Further research should broaden the scope and consider also other product categories such as those pointed above.

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