

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' CHOICE AND PURCHASE OF CLOTHING FOR PRE-SCHOOLERS IN KENYA: IMPLICATION FOR EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Clothing is one of the major basic needs of the human being. The type of clothing for children has a major influence on their involvement in play activities. This study aimed at establishing whether parents of pre-school children in Nairobi are aware of the children's clothing needs and identify the factors which influence their choices of the clothes for them. One hundred and twenty pre-school children were randomly selected from four randomly selected nursery schools in Nairobi to act as intermediaries to the various households. The parents/guardians of the children were the respondents of the study. The sampling was done through stratified, multi-stage cluster method. A questionnaire was used to elicit information. The data was descriptively presented. Among other findings, the parents considered freedom of movement and peer group approval to be of some importance, while self-help features were of least importance. Other influential factors were how well it fitted, durability, and quality of construction. The findings have implications for exercise involvement for the children as they require clothing that allows them to play at all times including jumping, rolling, throwing, catching, sliding, among others. Some of these play activities provide the foundation for the eventual sporting techniques for elite as well as recreational purposes. It is, therefore, recommended that parents be educated to take the clothing selection for their children seriously if the latter are to enjoy their play experience.

Key words: *Pre-schoolers, clothing selection, self-help features, durability.*

INTRODUCTION

Through the years, various researchers (Hartman, 1949; Horn, 1975; Kaiser, 1985; Otieno, 1990; Rosencranz, 1962; Sproles, 1979; Storm, 1987) have suggested the need for more studies, which would provide increased understanding of clothing selection and human behaviour. They asserted that decisions regarding clothing and personal appearance are factors at all levels of social organisation. Attempts to explain these behaviours are interesting and puzzling reflections of human nature. Among the many factors that may influence consumers in their clothing selection and purchases, age has been identified as a significant one (Frisbee, 1985; Horn, 1975; Littler, 1985; Otieno, 1990; Sproles, 1979). Most cultures consider certain forms of clothing appropriate for infants, children, teens, adults, and the elderly. According to Horn (1975), the needs of each specific age group should be considered when clothing choices are made. Thus every purchase occurs with some purposeful

function and/or satisfaction of needs in mind (Sproles, 1979). Although studies have been done on clothing selection for various other age groups (Creekmore, 1980; Horn, 1975; Kaiser, 1985; Sproles, 1979; Otieno, 1990) little is known about parental clothing selection for pre-school children especially with its implication for their play activities. Studies indicate that clothing affects children more than adults realise (Horn, 1975; Kaiser, 1985). The purpose of this study was to establish whether parents of pre-school children in Nairobi are aware of the children's clothing needs and identify the factors which influence their choices of the clothes for them.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study utilised 120 randomly selected respondents. One hundred and twenty pre-school children were randomly selected from four randomly selected nursery schools in Nairobi to act as intermediaries to the various households. It is the parents/guardians of the children who were the respondents of the study. The sampling was done through stratified, multi-stage cluster method. A self-administered questionnaire was used to elicit information pertaining to the parents/guardians' demographic characteristics, child's gender and product characteristics. The data was descriptively presented.

RESULTS

The results showed that of the 120 respondents, sixty-six (55%) were females and fifty-four (45%) males. This could be so because in most Kenyan households, women take care of the young children's needs including clothing. Forty-five percent of the respondents were single, while fifty five percent were married. Regarding selection of the pre-schoolers clothing, the results showed that it was done by different family members; both mothers and fathers (57.7%), mother only (31.7%), father only (2.5%), family members (7.5%), and child (0.8%). The purchasing of the clothes done at no specific intervals (43.3%), yearly (33.3%), every six months (21.7%), and monthly (1.7%). The reasons for the interval of purchasing clothing were that it is due to wear, tear, and fast growth (45%), financial constraints (25.8%), impulsive purchases (21.7%), yearly functions (4.2%), and sales (3.3%). No provision was therefore made for special needs such as for play, daily wear and other special functions.

On the importance of a child's gender on clothing decisions, 28.3% indicated it is always important, 41.7% important, 18.3% sometimes important and 11.7% did not consider it important. On children's preferences, 43.4% indicated that girls preferred to have girls' clothing, 45% that the boys preferred boys' clothes, while 8.3% and 3.3% indicated that the girls preferred boys' clothes and that boys preferred girls' clothes respectively. Table one shows 17 product characteristics that influence the choice of the pre-schooler's clothing ranked in order of importance.

Table 1: Influential product characteristics

Characteristics	Always important		Sometimes important		Never important	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
How well it fits	88	73.3	29	24.2	3	2.5
Durability	78	65.0	40	33.3	2	1.7
Well constructed	77	64.2	40	33.3	3	2.5
Fabric quality	73	60.8	40	33.3	7	5.8
Price	71	59.2	38	31.7	11	9.2
Freedom of movement	65	51.7	45	37.5	13	10.8
Weather suitability	59	49.2	50	41.7	11	9.2
Maintenance	54	45.0	49	40.8	17	14.2
Garment style	41	34.2	67	55.8	12	10.0
Colour	41	34.2	51	47.5	22	18.3
End-use performance	39	32.5	61	50.8	20	16.7
Fabric design	42	35.0	50	41.7	28	23.3
Fibre content	31	25.8	54	45.0	35	29.2
Trims	25	20.8	60	50.0	35	29.2
Growth features	25	20.8	56	46.03	39	32.5
Information labels	17	14.2	46	38.3	57	47.5
Self-help features	14	11.7	46	38.3	60	50.0

N: 120

Table one shows that most parents valued comfort, durability, aesthetic appeal and cost. However, freedom of movement which has implication for exercise, maintenance, colour, end use performance and fabric design are of moderate influence while self-help features that help children manage their dressing easily were of least importance.

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that most mothers and fathers jointly selected clothing for their children. Collective decisions are better than one person's. However, a

significant number of mothers did the selection alone.

This reflects the prominent role that women play in taking care of the young children's needs. However, when it came to the frequency of purchasing, it was evident that most people do it impulsively with no pre-set pattern. The reasons for the unplanned purchases, include the predictable wear, tear, and fast growth of the children, financial constraints and the impulsive nature in the buyers.

The gender of the children was important in the clothing decisions. However, 11.7% did not consider gender at all. According to Horn (1975), this could be due to permissive nature of the society, which allows for greater variability of acceptable gender forms and styles of clothing for children than other age groups.

It was interesting to note that more girls preferred boys' clothing (8.3%) as opposed to boys who preferred girls' clothing (3.3%). The figures suggest that boys are socialised into following a strict code of dressing more than the girls. Boy's clothes are associated with masculinity (Horn 1975), which is a sign of strength. Any tendency for boys to like girls' clothing is considered a weakness hence discouraged immediately. On the other hand, girls may be allowed to wear boys' clothes without any restrictions. Most girls feel freer in boys' clothing to jump around while playing. Others even behave roughly (like boys!) than when in frilly feminine dresses (Kaiser, 1985). Such girls also prefer boys' games and other rough games outdoors.

It is, however, noteworthy that half of the parents considered the opinions of their children as important in the selection of clothing. Children prefer same or similar dressing as their friends' for peer approval and formation of play groups. Over and under-dressing lead to rejection and therefore no play. Where a parent does not consult the child, one ends up buying what one prefers as opposed to what the child would prefer. Parents who make sole decisions on the children's clothing develops extra attachments to the clothing which may infringe on a child's freedom of play especially in messing them up.

The most influential product characteristics in the choice of the pre-schoolers' clothing were comfort, durability, aesthetics, fabric quality and the price. The aspects of how well clothing fitted and durability have implications for exercise. Clothes in which a child feels comfortable do not restrict his or her movement. Additionally, durability matters given that children are actively involved in the exploration of their environments. The clothes have to be laundered frequently and are exposed to a lot of strain when the children roll, skip, slide, jump and climb around. McCullough and Morris (1980) have made similar observations.

Of moderate influence, yet with major implications for exercise, were the factors of freedom of movement, weather suitability, maintenance, garment style, colour, end-use performance and fabric design. Freedom of movement was not rated that highly as some parents may be ignorant of its importance to children's clothing. As a convenience, clothing allows the wearer's freedom of movement and performance of physical activities (Horn, 1975; Kaiser, 1985;

Sproles, 1979). Since children play most of the time, their clothing should be flexible rather than binding (Neal, 1976; Storm, 1987). Restrictive clothing limits the range of activities that a child can engage in. Physical activity for children of between ages 3 and 12 has been emphasised as being vital to health as well as skill acquisition (Cachay, 1991; Singh, 1982). Clothing maintenance is also an important factor that was surprisingly ranked only moderately. Since children's clothes are to be laundered frequently, they should be easy to care for. Clothes that require expensive care make parents restrict children's play and children end up hating such clothing.

Of significance was the fact that only 32.5% of the respondents considered end-use performance as an important factor in the choice of clothing. A sizeable 16.7% never considered it as important. Probably this is the reason why some parents purchase clothing for their children that do not suit the various activities the children are engaged in. For example, children in clothing of expensive or delicate fabrics on occasions that do not call for such clothing will not feel free to play around for fear of ruining their clothes, warranting punishment by their parents. The ones who play around, with such clothing spoil them. Since children play a lot, clothing should cater for this need. The finding seems to suggest that some parents are ignorant of the need to consider end-use performance in their children's clothes as they do the selection. Other factors that were ranked low yet are of significance to exercise activities of children include "future growth" features. When such aspects are not taken care of, a child ends up being bought over sized clothes that not only impede his or her adventurous movements but also cause psychological damage as the child constantly feels like a small adult and wants to behave like one (Glisson and Tate, 1967).

CONCLUSION

Pre-school children, who range in age between 3-7 years, are at a stage of exploration. They are at a stage where they are improving their motor co-ordination, balance, speed and basic endurance. Additionally, the period climaxes with their first constitutional change leading to one where various sporting techniques can be acquired. Given the significance of this period in life, it is vital that the parents are sensitised to buy clothing appropriately so that the children's needs and freedom of movement is not impeded.

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