Like mother, like daughter: lessons in fashion consumption, taste and class

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Introduction

Since the 1950s, psychoanalysts and sociologists have acknowledged an important link between mothers and daughters (e.g., Young and Wilmott, 1957; Fischer, 1981; Boyd, 1989) and it is frequently argued that women learn ‘how to be women’ by following and imitating the practices of their mothers (Boyd, 1989: 291; Woertman, 1993: 57; De Beauvoir, [1949] 1997). Within academic discussions of fashion and consumption practices, mothers are seen to play a significant role in terms of children’s ‘consumption-related skills, knowledge and attitudes’ (Ward, 1974: 1; Clarke and Miller, 2002; Pilcher, 2013), and as Collett (2005) and Rawlins (2006: 360) note, mothers are generally considered ‘accountable for the clothes their children wear’.

Indeed, despite women’s rising employment, mothers arguably continue to be the chief ‘carers’ within families (De Vault, 1991; Miller, 1997; Walkerdine et al, 2001; Jenkins, 2004) and the food and clothing decisions of the household are often considered to be specifically a mother’s responsibility. Although they may have less autonomy over their children’s clothes from the point of adolescence (Ganetz, 1995; Simpson and Douglas, 1998), mothers are still commonly seen by their daughters to be a key source of fashion advice long into their adulthood. Several authors have commented, for instance, on mothers sharing fashion tastes and clothing with their adult daughters (Barnes and Eicher, 1992; Miller, 1997; Grove-White, 2001) as well as shopping together for clothes (Klepp and Storm Mathisen, 2005). Though my research (Appleford, 2012), focused primarily on the relationship between fashion and class in British women’s fashion discourse and fashion practice, most participants discussed the way in which their fashion habits had been influenced by their mothers. And several noted how they still turned to their mothers for fashion advice when they were unsure of what to wear.
Fashion habitus

If mothers are seen to be such a significant influence in the cultivation of consumption practices, and more importantly are seen to share fashion tastes, it seems reasonable to suggest that they are also central figures in the development of their daughter’s fashion habitus and thus the cultivation of classed practices. Bourdieu defines habitus as ‘a system of durable, transposable dispositions … which generate and organise practices … representations’ (1990: 52) and schemes of perception ([1984] 2005: 171). Thus, it is our habitus that enables us to produce tastes and ‘classifiable practices and works’ (2005: 170). These operate as ‘distinctive signs’ of class position (2005: 174–5) and further enable us ‘to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products’ in relation to others (2005: 170). As a result, the habitus is a structure that orientates individuals’ practice and at the same time provides a means of classification and differentiation between class groups.

Moreover, Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) and Entwistle (2009) argue that within certain fields such as dance, acting and fashion, our knowledge or ‘capital’ is actually ‘worn on the body’ and articulated through a ‘bodily habitus’ (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006: 746). Exhibited through the clothes we wear and the way we move, our ‘fashion habitus’ (Entwistle, 2009: 114) is a physical and aesthetic practice, which makes our tastes instantly apparent and which therefore allows others to evaluate and place us ‘at first glance’ (Veblen, [1899] 1994: 103).

In recent discussions of childhood consumption, authors such as Martens et al (2004) and Pilcher (2013) have acknowledged that parents may offer fundamental insights into the ‘reproduction of structural differences’ as they ‘clearly represent a young child’s most significant influence’ (Martens et al, 2004: 166–7). Yet, within the academic discourse of fashion it seems that few have acknowledged the way in which mothers in particular are responsible for cultivating fashion practices and attitudes that operate as class markers. But, if mothers are a fundamental influence on their daughter’s perceptions of fashion, surely they are key players in cultivating their daughter’s fashion habitus, and thus the dispositions that not only structure their individual practice, but also act as a means of classification within the wider social context.

Asking mum’s advice

In my research (Appleford, 2012) daughters often talked of ‘trusting’ their mother’s opinions, because they felt that their mother ‘knows what suits them’ and ‘what looks good’. Indeed, mothers were seen as providing far more reliable advice than shop assistants or friends, who according to one participant would “always say it looks great, even if you have a bucket on your head!” The confidence that women have in their mother’s opinions may to a large extent be a result of the love, and the physical, social and emotional closeness that exists between them (Rich, [1986] 1995; Lawler, 2000: 3). As Miller (1998: 18) suggests, shopping is one of the chief ways in which women’s care, concern and obligation toward their family is manifested and reproduced and it is the primary ‘means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice’. Equally, though, women may be more willing to accept their mother’s comments and vice versa, because they share the same fashion capital and fashion habitus, and therefore the same perspective of what ‘looks good’. Having obtained their knowledge of fashion from their mothers, mothers and daughters present women with
Like mother, like daughter

the opinions and practices closest to their own, and with which they consequently are most comfortable and most familiar. As Bourdieu argues, their habitus provides them with a common ‘sense of place’ ([1984] 2005: 466) and ‘a kind of affinity or style … immediate recognisable’ ([1984] 2005: 44) and ‘mutually intelligible’ (1990: 58). They therefore trust their mother’s opinion because it is representative of their own, based on a common understanding of how one should dress.

In many respects, this is what Clarke and Miller (2002) identify, although they do not attribute this to habitus but a ‘supportive relationship’ in relation to fashion anxiety. They note, for example, the way in which mothers and daughters are ‘regularly drawn to identical garments as potential purchases and pre-empt each other’s preferences in matters of style’ (2002: 199). They argue that they have similar likes and dislikes, a ‘joint taste’, and even when living apart, still seek each other’s approval on prospective purchases and outfits.

That is not to say that mothers and daughters always agree. As others identify, Bourdieu’s theory is in many respects overly deterministic (Jenkins, 1992), and as Woodward (2007: 102) argues, some women still ‘assert their autonomy through their clothing choices’. Indeed, Abbott and Sapsford (2001: 36) suggest that teenage girls in particular often ‘resist parental ideas of what is suitable’ and are instead drawn to clothes that they feel are sexy and will attract the ‘male gaze’ (Berger, 1972). Yet, at the same time, in both my research and others, mothers and daughters seem to share a strong affinity around fashion purchases, due in part to their common schema and perceptions, dispositions and bodily practice. Even teenage girls tend to seek advice from mothers and girlfriends, rather than boyfriends, even if the ‘important consideration’ is ‘what boys would think’ (Abbott and Sapsford, 2001: 31).

The mother’s influences

It is not only in terms of shared tastes where class is relevant. The ways in which middle- and working-class mothers cultivate a fashion habitus also need further consideration. In my research there were important class distinctions in the ways in which mothers taught their daughters about fashion and shopping, and about looking good and dressing up. While middle-class mothers were much more focused on gatekeeping, keen to prevent their daughters from wearing clothes that they felt were indicative of working-class status, working-class mothers were much more likely to shop with their daughters and make collective decisions about what looked good. So whereas middle-class mothers vetoed items, such as white stilettos for being ‘too Essex girl’, working-class mothers tended instead to collaborate with their daughters. They swapped catalogues, for example, and shared jewellery, clothes and shoes, they watched fashion programmes together and shared hints and tips that they had picked up from fashion items or other women.

Moreover, conversations with the participants about their own fashion practices highlighted the long lasting influence that mothers have, and the durability of the habitus that Bourdieu ([1984] 2005) identifies. Several participants noted how they continued with practices, such as ‘keeping for best’ that their mothers insisted on during their childhood, or how they still preferred the styles, fabric or colours that their mothers had encouraged them to dress in. Similarly, participants who were mothers themselves commented on the ways in which they ‘passed on’ habits to their
daughters – either through explicit teachings or unintentionally and unconsciously just through being.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that motherhood itself can have an important effect on how women engage with fashion, because of the way in which it alters body shape and perceptions of appropriate dress. This too is an area that is under-researched but which is pertinent to many women today and is potentially an important aspect of the fashion–class dimension. For it seems that motherhood can have an important influence on women’s perceptions of social audiences and social spaces, and can subsequently impact on women’s sense of obligation to dress up and perform for others.

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