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Consumerism takes center stage as youth prepare for back to school

By Diether Haenicke
August 19, 2009

At this time of the year an all-out effort is launched to make consumers of our children. The Sunday paper is filled with special inserts that cry for the attention of pupils from kindergarten to high school. They are the "Back 2 School" advertisements that show school kids what is hip and in to wear for school.

I found six such advertisements last Sunday -- and perhaps overlooked others.

The advertisement pages are populated by attractive youngsters, all bright smiles on their faces, slim and slender everyone of them, all stylishly coifed and engaged in athletic activity or just happily clowning around with other school age children. They look like fashion models usually look: pretty girls and handsome boys, happy and carefree. The models represent the universally desired type, the one to be emulated, the "popular" girl or boy.

Of course none of them is overweight or burdened with average looks. The only concession to reality is that we see both sexes and several races -- like in a real school class.

Since these are ads that focus on school children and the beginning school year, I had expected that some of the model pupils might perhaps be reading a book, doing a math problem or might at least be shown in a setting that reminds one of a classroom, a library or a lab. Silly me! Of course the children are depicted on basketball courts, with skate boards under their arms, kicking balls or sitting on swings or smooching kisses on each other.

I mean, you know, like in a real school.

Now what does the hip first grader or high school freshman wear this year? Only brand name or designer clothes, of course. Levis jeans, Nike windbreakers, Color Circuit girls' cardigans, Tommy Hilfiger sweaters, Bugle Boy separates, NFL team sportswear, women's BUM Equipment nylon pants and other such fashion names are socially obligatory for the school child that wants to be with it. Can any child still obtain an acceptable degree of popularity without bowing to the fashion demands of the school social scene as dictated by the clothing designers?

All of us who are parents and have navigated children through their school years know how terribly important it is for most school age children to be accepted by their peers. We also know how tyrannical the dictates of fashion are among children. They will wear almost anything that is considered "in" by those who define the proper look in a school. There was a time when my son would rather own just two shirts with a guy playing polo on his left shoulder than possess a wider range of wardrobe like his father who bought his shirts at Penney's.

But at least those Polo shirts looked nice. I have always pitied those parents of the next generation whose children fell into the fashion hell that prescribed men's shirts many sizes too large for girls and boys pants with seats dangling somewhere at ankle height. They can still be seen occasionally. I was always astounded at this successful attempt of youngsters to look as unkempt and neglected as the poorest orphans in a Charles Dickens novel. All this was to be worn with basketball shoes - laces not tied, of course.

With all this on my mind, I welcome the news that Kalamazoo's Edison Elementary School is issuing school uniforms to its charges this fall. No more snickering, so it is hoped, at those children whose parents cannot afford designer clothes. No more misplaced emphasis on fashion where learning should be central. Two first-graders are shown on the front page of the Gazette in their new outfits, seriously engaged in a school project, a blackboard and teaching aids in full view. I mean, you know, like in a real school.

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