

CPYU Trend Alert: "High-end Fashion and Accessories"

by Chris and Beth Wagner

What do American Eagle, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Hollister have in common? These popular clothing and accessories stores used to be the brand names of choice for most teenagers in this country. Stop by any suburban high school or mall a few years back and you could find teenagers with Hollister or A & F emblazoned on the front of their t-shirts or the well-known eagle of the American Eagle brand embroidered on their polo's, sweaters, and skirts. But that was then and this is now. In what seems to be only a matter of a few short years these trendy mall brands have been replaced by high-end designers bearing the names Dooney & Bourke, Chanel, Coach, UGG, True Religion, Baby Phat, and 7 For All Mankind. And that's just naming a few. Gone are the days of spending a hard earned month's allowance on a \$40 pair of American Eagle jeans, replaced now by teens using Mom and Dad's credit card on a \$150 (and that's cheap!) pair of 7 jeans, whose website proclaimed last December, "Give the Gift of Luxury this Holiday Season."

What caused this shift toward high-end apparel and accessories in such a short time? A mix of media, celebrities, and the obsession to "fit in" no matter what the cost. To begin with, teen girls are exposed to hundreds of images of female celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie, and Lindsay Lohan sporting designer sunglasses and toting high-end handbags (and even high-end dog carriers.) Not only do magazines such as *Teen Vogue* feature ads for brands including Louis Vuitton and Privacy Wear, but movies drop name brands and logos so often we wonder if we're watching a two-hour long commercial. And one of the newest places for high-end marketers to name drop? Believe it or not, books specifically aimed at teen girls dubbed "teen chick lit." Delve into the popular series *The Clique* where references to designer clothing and accessories abound. So what's a girl to do? If she wants to be at the top of the popularity food chain she needs to step up from her junior high days of wearing Aeropostale and step into her UGG's (whose \$160 sheepskin boots were the "It" item among female teen and college-age students a few years back.) The high price tag of many accessory items adds an interesting twist to this trend. Because most teens cannot afford these expensive items to begin with, it's not uncommon for some girls to wear "normal" priced clothing while accessorizing with a single high-end item. This one accessory may be the ticket needed to gain acceptance into one of the popular cliques at school.

High-end brands, such as Dooney & Bourke and Coach, which specialize in handbags and accessories, are sold both online and in higher end department stores such as Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and Nordstrom's. They have taken notice of the trend and tailor lower end products, such as wallets and wristlets (a small purse designed to carry with a strap around the wrist) to teens as an attempt to lure them into higher priced items as they get older and have more disposable income. Take a quick visit online to coach.com where on their homepage you can click on the link "teen chic." Here you will find handbags ranging in price from \$128 to \$448. Too much to spend on your teenage daughter? Perhaps last Winter you could visit the section titled "stocking stuffers (under \$100)" where a festive leather snowman key fob is a mere \$38. What happened to the \$2 plastic key chains girls would scoop up for all their friends at Claire's? (A low priced accessory store.)

And where are these girls getting the money to purchase these high priced luxury items? Most are not purchasing them for themselves but are receiving them from parents or other relatives as gifts. Parents who remember how painful high school can be succumb to their teen's wishes only to fuel the desire for more (and often more expensive) items. In the competitive world of high school, girls are constantly on the lookout for the next big thing, the newest designer, the most expensive pair of sunglasses. The Coach bag that your teen daughter HAD to have last year becomes lost in the back of her closet as she now covets an \$80 Vera Bradley quilted messenger

bag. Visit verabradley.com where on their homepage you will see a picture of four young smiling teenage girls all clutching their own designer bag.

While the girls on Vera Bradley's homepage appear to be around 13 years old, many designers are creating or expanding their lines to include clothing for children as young as toddlers. Soon we may walk into a preschool class to find children wearing designers such as Marc Jacobs – whose kids' line is called Little Marc - Burberry, or Juicy Couture – who offers sweatpants for girls for around \$100. The pressure to fit in, impress, and own the season's latest trends, not only affects teens, but parents as well, as many parents use their children as a benchmark for their success. High-fashion moms will often dress their young children, especially their daughters, in clothing similar to their own.

There is nothing inherently wrong with owning nice things and trying to look your best. However, the fuel pushing teens to desire these expensive items is often materialism marked by the need for acceptance. Therefore, to speak truth into the realm of this cultural trend, parents, youth workers and educators must address both the topics of materialism and self-worth with their teens.

Marketers continually push new items in order to make last year's fashions old news. To stay up with the times, teens need to have the new "It" items of the season. Materialism has a way of creeping into our hearts unknowingly. It often goes unaddressed. Teens and adults alike feel that the next purchase will fulfill the longing they have in their lives, only to make the purchase and still be left feeling empty. The emptiness builds up until we discover a new "must-have," and we hold out hope that this item will fill the void we so desperately desire to have filled. The vicious cycle of materialism continues. Of course, though many of us and our teens already know it, God is the only one who can fill this void. Only the Holy Spirit can help teach us to become content with the wonderful gifts that God has given us. Seeking God's will allows us to be aligned with his ways, rather than our own selfish desires. These are the truths we must live out in front of the teens in our lives. Just as teens learn and pick-up the materialism bug from our actions, modeling Godly behavior demonstrates a life of contentment and thanksgiving.

Teenage culture and the halls of the middle school and high school can be a cut-throat environment. Groups of fickle teens decide that in order to be popular or accepted you must have the correct outward appearance, especially in regards to clothing and accessories. The pressure to fit in is immense! No wonder our teens go to great lengths to attain these high-end items. Friendships (though probably not the proper word) are literally on the line. Let's face it, when our peers won't accept us, it hurts. We must shift the eyes of our students who look to their peers for approval, to Jesus, who accepts us as we are. Unfortunately it won't be as simple as removing the \$300 pair of sunglasses from their eyes. In order for teens to see their value in Christ, they must believe the truth that they were created in God's image and that God cared so much for us that he sent his Son. Once again, we adults too often fall into the trap of looking to our peers for valuation. It will be up to us to demonstrate God's truth.

Maybe you've been saving up money to buy those designer jeans on your teens' "must-have" list. Again, there's nothing wrong with making such a purchase, but perhaps you could also invest some time addressing the ways in which materialism rears its ugly head in your home. Affirm your children's worth and let them know they are loved by you, and by Christ. Let your greatest gift to your teens be a reminder that not only are they your children, but they are also children of God, deeply loved by Him, and given new life of their own through His life, death, and resurrection. That is a priceless high-end gift worth boasting about.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at
www.cpyu.org.**