Eaton’s Goes to School: Youth Councils and the Commodityfication of the Teenaged Consumer at Canada’s Largest Department Store, 1940-1960

KATHARINE ROLLWAGEN

During the 1940s and 1950s Canada’s dominant department store, the T. Eaton Company Ltd, made extensive efforts to establish a relationship with urban high school students. This article examines the company’s attempts to validate teenagers’ active participation in the retail marketplace as distinct consumers to be defined, catered to, and, ultimately, commodified in gendered ways. Eaton’s saw these young, White and mostly middle-class high school boys and girls as a new market segment, and formed advisory councils in several stores as a way to solicit teenaged opinions, recruit employees, and access student peer networks. This extensive programme combined public relations with advertising and quasi-educational objectives. This analysis sheds light on the relationship between Eaton’s and school authorities and demonstrates how retailers and educators saw market interactions as part of growing up in mid-century Canada.

Au cours des années 1940 et 1950, le principal magasin à rayons du Canada, la Compagnie T. Eaton limitée, a déployé beaucoup d’efforts afin d’établir une relation avec les élèves des écoles secondaires en milieu urbain. Le présent article porte sur les tentatives de l’entreprise visant à valider la participation active des adolescents dans le monde du commerce de détail à titre de consommateurs distincts qu’ils fallait dès lors définir, desservir et réifier selon le sexe. Voyant ces grands écoliers et écolières, majoritairement blancs et issus de la classe moyenne, comme représentants d’un nouveau segment de marché, la Compagnie Eaton a alors créé des comités consultatifs dans plusieurs magasins de façon à solliciter leur opinion, à recruter des employés et à percer les réseaux d’élèves. Ce vaste programme s’est traduit par des campagnes de relations publiques aux objectifs publicitaires et quasi-éducatifs. La présente analyse met en lumière la relation entre la Compagnie Eaton et les autorités scolaires, en plus de montrer de quelle

* Katharine Rollwagen teaches in the Department of History at Vancouver Island University. She wishes to thank the Histoire Sociale editor and reviewers for their thorough and thoughtful comments, and her colleagues at the L.R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History at McMaster University for their encouragement. She is also grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Ottawa for supporting this research.

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TWENTY-FIRST-century teenagers are pursued relentlessly by advertisers and retailers hoping to sell them on the latest fashion, trend, or electronic gadget. Today’s young people sit on focus groups, answer surveys, and become corporate “insiders” relaying their peers’ preferences to research companies that sell the information to advertisers eager to earn the biggest share of the lucrative teenaged consumer market.¹ While these developments have been both lauded and decried, those studying and commenting on such phenomena typically assume that targeting teenagers through teenagers is a “practice that became an industry standard” in the last 25 years.² However, companies have been enlisting young people to market their products and build their brands for far longer. Beginning in 1939, the Timothy Eaton Company, known across Canada as Eaton’s, invited a group of teenaged girls into its Toronto department store on a weekly basis to give their opinions of the merchandise. When these meetings produced what senior management believed were useful tips on the girls’ shopping preferences, the company decided to develop a more comprehensive programme designed to solicit input from teenaged consumers—girls and boys—and introduce them to Eaton’s merchandise and store operations.

In 1940, Eaton’s selected boys and girls from local high schools to join two newly created youth groups. The Junior Council was for girls, and its members were called Councillors. The boys in the Junior Executive were called Executives. Quickly these became more than just focus groups. At Saturday morning meetings in the store, these 16- to 18-year-olds listened to guest speakers, watched films, critiqued Eaton’s merchandise, and toured store departments. Sometimes they planned window displays or fashion shows or composed their own advertising copy for contests. Many worked part time in store departments or volunteered at corporate or charity events. Eaton’s managers saw the Councillors and Executives as a valuable “teen-age indicator,” keeping the company informed of young people’s likes and dislikes and providing Eaton’s a direct line to Canada’s urban high school students—the retailer’s potential customers and employees.³ By 1946, Eaton’s had groups of Councillors and Executives active in six stores in Montreal, Southern Ontario, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton. In Toronto and Winnipeg the programme ran for several decades and involved dozens of public high schools and hundreds of students who volunteered to serve as representatives. Yet the significance and meaning of this extensive programme to the histories of youth, consumer culture, and education have not, until now, been analysed.

Through its Junior Executive and Council programme, Eaton’s selected candidates and engaged in a form of what advertisers today call “coolhunting” to recruit predominantly white, urban, middle-class students as representatives of its teenaged market. The company also pursued relationships with schools, promoting itself as an educational partner, in an effort to gain access to (and foster) these spaces of emerging middle-class youth culture that were increasingly centred on commercialized leisure and consumer goods. This analysis demonstrates how the company commodified and gendered the Councillors and Executives, promoting a commercial persona of the high school student as an autonomous and savvy spender, while reflecting and reinforcing prevailing gender norms by prescribing particular masculine and feminine interactions with the consumer marketplace to Executives and Councillors respectively.

This study contributes to a growing North American literature that has situated the origins of corporate-sponsored teenaged consumer culture in the 1930s and 1940s. While historians have often credited the Baby Boomers with first attracting marketers’ attention—one claiming that earlier teenagers “were unable to exert much cultural presence”—the Council and Executive programme demonstrates that Eaton’s recognized, targeted, and commodified high school consumers more than a decade before this large cohort hit puberty. The idea of a distinct teenaged consumer grew, not from the sheer number of young people, but from shifting understandings of child development. By the 1930s many child psychologists and educators understood adolescence as a distinct period of physical and social development, a unique stage between childhood and adulthood characterized, according to American child psychologist G. Stanley Hall, by internal conflict. Historians have demonstrated that the social upheaval of the Great Depression and Second World War raised many concerns among adults about the activities and future prospects of young people. Commercial entities such as Eaton’s contributed to these discussions, suggesting at what age young people could be expected to make their own consumer choices and achieve a measure of economic autonomy and, in the process, asserting a distinct teenaged identity before the word “teenager” came into common use.


The Junior Councillors and Executives also illuminate Eaton’s attempts to target both boys and girls, albeit in different, gendered ways. Male consumers have received much less attention than female consumers from scholars of consumer culture. Many scholars, as historian Gail Reekie notes, have “obscured the sexual politics of selling” by failing to analyse the gendered dynamics between female shoppers and male salespeople and have perpetuated the idea of consumption as a feminine and feminizing pursuit. This study draws attention to the way that the activities of Councillors and Executives defined and reinforced distinct, gendered relationships to consumer goods and the retail marketplace.

The Eaton’s Junior Council and Executive programme is also significant because it is an example of a long and seemingly cooperative relationship between one corporation and schools in several Canadian cities. Contemporary debates about the commercialization of classrooms often assume a much more recent history of corporate involvement in providing schools with equipment, supplies, and curriculum, although Canadian historians Robert and Catherine Gidney have found evidence of companies offering free teaching aids to Canadian teachers regularly between 1920 and 1960. Eaton’s engagement with high school students in the 1940s and 1950s further suggests that school commercialization is not a recent phenomenon.

To examine the place of Eaton’s Junior Council and Executive programme in these historical debates, this study utilizes the corporate records of the T. Eaton Company, located at the Archives of Ontario. These records include meeting minutes, memos, promotional documents, and application forms that point to Eaton’s desire to profit from a closer relationship with a selected group of urban high school students. While these materials are extensive, they are also limited in several ways. Most of the surviving records on the Junior Council and Executive were those kept by two Eaton’s employees, both heavily involved in the groups. In Winnipeg, Tom Miller was a sales manager; in Toronto, Jack Brockie started the original group in 1939 when he was the Merchandise Display Department manager, led the groups throughout the 1940s, and continued to keep tabs on the students when he later became the head of Eaton’s Public Relations Office. Both men were very familiar with the programme, leading meetings, corresponding with school officials, and selecting members in their respective stores in the years between 1940 and the early 1950s. As a result, while this paper makes reference to groups in other cities, and draws on some material from the later 1950s, it focuses mainly on the period from 1940 to 1955 in Eaton’s Toronto and Winnipeg locations because these records have survived.


Examining these records to explore Eaton’s motivations and decisions requires an analytical framework that acknowledges the corporation’s distinct perspective of its own markets. Sociologist Daniel Cook suggests that industry publications constitute the “back stage of social encounters—a space away from the scrutinizing gaze of the general public where the work of erecting a façade gets accomplished.”\(^{11}\) Cook calls the identities that retailers assign to specific kinds of customers behind closed doors “commercial personae”—a commercially motivated depiction in words and images that serves the corporate interest of sustaining and expanding markets.\(^ {12}\) Such was Eaton’s relationship with the high school consumer—not so much a recognition of who Canadian students really were as much as an idealized view of a white and middle-class student with spending money and a keen eye for quality merchandise. Cook argues these personae became commodities in the industry; since consumer personae helped advertisers sell and retailers profit, they acquired a value that could be exchanged.\(^ {13}\) The image of the autonomous high school student as an Eaton’s insider was one from which the company believed it could—quite literally—profit.

In this sense, Eaton’s was commodifying high school students—imbuing the image, activities, and even bodies of high school students with exchange value. Historian Donica Belisle has argued that Eaton’s commodified many of its employees by advertising to them—enticing them to buy and use its merchandise—and by using their images and appearance in its publicity.\(^ {14}\) The Junior Council and Executive programme represents another facet of this corporate commodification, except that, instead of commodifying existing employees, Eaton’s sought out secondary students aged 16 to 18 years, asked for their assistance in serving the high school market, used their voluntary and paid labour in stores and at promotional events, and then took credit for being the store preferred by teenage consumers.

Before examining how Eaton’s defined and commodified the autonomous high school consumer, we need to understand the company’s decision to target teenaged customers by creating the Council and Executive. Eaton’s was not the only retailer attempting to reach and develop the teenaged market in the 1940s and 1950s, and company officials may have believed they needed to keep up with their competitors. Several large American department stores had started youth advisory groups in the late 1930s, to favourable effect.\(^ {15}\) From his office in Toronto, Merchandise Display Department manager and Junior Council and Executive adviser Jack Brockie kept tabs on these groups and perhaps even borrowed ideas from them.\(^ {16}\) Company officials also wanted to strengthen Eaton’s

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12 Ibid., p. 19.
13 Ibid., pp. 18-20.
market share and its public image in the wake of the Great Depression, when it faced a backlash against big retailers accused of undercutting competition and underpaying workers.\textsuperscript{17} Despite maintaining its position as the largest retailer in Canada (and the eighth largest in the world) throughout the 1930s, Eaton’s was slowly losing customers to chain stores, many of which were smaller discount retail outlets run by manufacturers.\textsuperscript{18} Eaton’s also faced competition—particularly in Toronto—from the Robert Simpson Company, which, by 1945, had started its own youth group called the Collegiate Club and was recruiting high school and university students to advise its Toronto store.\textsuperscript{19} The Second World War also increased consumer spending dramatically. An awareness of this pent-up demand and the desire of returning veterans and young people to buy homes and start families likely also fuelled the department stores’ desire to secure the dollars and customer loyalty of high school students, whose purchasing power would only increase in the years to come.

Why did Eaton’s choose to focus on high school students rather than those who had left school and were working? Historian David Fowler argues that, in Britain, young wage earners who embraced commercial leisure and formed their own distinct culture were the first teenagers. He means they were the first to embody a specific socially constructed life-stage closely tied to consumer culture.\textsuperscript{20} However, in Canada, the word “teenager” did not have similar connotations until the mid-1950s, long after Eaton’s had created the Junior Councillors and Executives. It is more likely that Eaton’s turned to urban high schools because they provided a ready-made pool of potential recruits, bringing together as they did more teenaged Canadians in one place than any other institution.\textsuperscript{21} That said, high school attendance—particularly after the age of 16, the minimum age of Councillors and Executives—was far from a universal experience among Canadian adolescents in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940, fewer than 40 per cent of those aged 14 to 17 years were enrolled in high school—slightly more in urban areas. The number did not increase substantially by 1951.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Richard Matern and Joe Martin, “Case 6: Eaton’s: From the Great Depression to the Challenge from Simpsons-Sears” in Joe Martin, ed., Relentless Change: A Casebook for the Study of Canadian Business History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 144-145.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Attempts to locate corporate records on this group have so far been unsuccessful. All information on the Collegiate Club comes from an article that appeared in Mayfair. See “Teenagers Club,” Mayfair, August 1945, p. 93.
\item \textsuperscript{20} David Fowler, Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c. 1920-1970 (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
\item \textsuperscript{22} R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar offer a comprehensive analysis of attendance and enrolment patterns between 1900 and 1940 in How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900-1945 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), pp. 30-31, 35. The 1951 census reported that 43 per cent of urban Canadians aged 15 to 19 were enrolled in school (mostly, but not exclusively, in high school). In contrast, 92.5 per cent of urban children aged 10 to 14 were in school in 1951. See Canada, Ninth Census of Canada, Volume II: Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics (Ottawa, 1951), Table 24.
\end{itemize}
Despite being an institution that touched a minority of Canadians in their later teenaged years, the high school was still increasingly recognized as the “institutional ‘home’ of adolescence.” By forming its advisory groups around high school students, Eaton’s was acknowledging an increasingly peer-focused adolescent culture in urban Canada. As Cynthia Comacchio notes in *Dominion of Youth*, in the 1930s and 1940s the high school was the wellspring of a growing number of middle-class young people who saw themselves as part of a youth culture defined by commercialized leisure and consumer goods. Companies such as Eaton’s both “mirrored and amplified” the high school’s peer culture, in the words of historian Lisa Jacobson. Eaton’s studied the rites and rituals of a small group of students and, by extolling their virtues to encourage young people to shop in the stores, magnified those rites and rituals, giving a larger stage to an adolescent culture usually confined to the classroom. As the high school grew in cultural stature as the college had before it—depicted in Hollywood films, studied by academics, and touted by social reformers—the decision to recruit high school students to represent typical teenaged consumers may have seemed fairly obvious to Jack Brockie and the other employees who acted as the groups’ advisers.

High schools were ideal places to coolhunt, the term marketers today use to describe the process of searching for the trendsetters—the early adopters of new products and styles on whom retailers often rely to help them decide which products to sell. While Eaton’s did not use the term coolhunting, the programme’s application form reveals that the company sought outgoing and popular students to become Councillors and Executives, to represent both their peers and the company. The form (identical for boys and girls) included questions on personal information (date of birth, age, grade level, home address), clothing size, hobbies, and future ambitions. Applicants were asked to include their favourite subjects, their part-time jobs, and their father’s occupation. They were asked what activities and sports they participated in at school and in the larger community. Reference letters and academic averages were also requested. The application form, as well as a comparison of some of the attributes of successful and unsuccessful applicants, points to the company’s belief that the high school was a gateway to young people’s social networks.

Eaton’s wanted representatives with appeal among their peers, those to whom others would be eager to listen and quick to emulate. To that end, six of the 30 questions on the application related to extra-curricular activities, hobbies, and sports, suggesting that Eaton’s was interested in what potential applicants did outside the classroom. Indeed, academic achievement was less important to Eaton’s employees than “general ability and an outgoing personality.”

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with store executives, council advisers were warned not to “over emphasize either scholastic or athletic ability, but [to] find a boy or girl who is typically an all around student and who has the cooperation and support of the student body.” Eaton’s wanted students with a good knowledge of, and experience with, the social activities of their schools and peer groups to connect the department store to what company officials believed was a lucrative base of customers.

Analysis of the applicants’ answers to these questions suggests that Eaton’s employees in Winnipeg preferred those students who held more official positions in school, ranging from captaining a sports team or representing their class as school president to editing the school yearbook. Two further questions on the Winnipeg application forms confirm this analysis. Boys were asked to list the “school activities you are interested in” and the “social functions you have in your school.” The second question, in particular, seemed to test boys’ knowledge of their schools’ social calendar. Answers included dances, parties, debates, and other events common at urban high schools in the 1940s and 1950s. Such questions measured the social savvy of Junior Council and Executive applicants. Eaton’s was looking for young people with social connections and peer influence. In the process of finding these students, Eaton’s extracted information about each school’s social events—potentially useful information for planning marketing activities to coincide with them. Furthermore, being chosen as a representative likely conveyed a certain amount of social status upon students, as several Councillors in 1945 reported they were proud to have been chosen to represent their schools and felt they had been “part of the store.”

The company’s desire to select students with peer appeal fit with the commercial persona of the autonomous high school student that Eaton’s believed described its Councillors and Executives and typified the teenaged consumer more generally. Described in promotional materials, this persona was self-directed, seemingly parent-free, peer-focused, and with distinct consumer desires. Autonomy was central to Eaton’s understanding of the teenaged consumer in the 1940s and 1950s, as it was in many adult and expert opinions of childhood and youth. Both Dan Cook and Lisa Jacobson have noted that businesses capitalized on the growing belief among those studying and advocating for children that young people were autonomous subjects. If children were believed to be sovereign beings, advertisers and retailers were free to address them directly, as Eaton’s did, emphasizing the subjectivity of the high school consumer it coveted. Councillors and Executives were “frank and decided” individuals, in the company’s view. The department store said repeatedly that only the students could tell the company what they and their peers liked. Jack Brockie even claimed, in an interview just prior to his retirement in 1963, that his reason for starting the Junior Council was

28 AO, 229-198, p. 9, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Junior Council and Junior Executive Advisers held at Toronto May 30, 31, and June 1, 1950.”
29 AO, 229-198, Junior Executives Chosen; AO, 229-198, Not Chosen.
30 AO, 229-151, file 69, Junior Fashion Council, 1944-1945.
a belief that the company was not serving its young customers and needed to ask them directly what they thought of Eaton’s merchandise.\(^{33}\)

Parents were all but absent from this understanding of the teenaged consumer. Mothers and fathers rarely appear in the company records except as proof of teenaged autonomy, as when Eaton’s noted in the 1940s that its young customers were leaving mothers at home and spending their own money.\(^{34}\) The Junior Council and Executive programme was modelled along the same lines as high school extra-curricular clubs, both imitating and amplifying the peer culture of the secondary school, with its diminished adult presence. However, the absence of parental authority at school also helped Eaton’s present an image of the high school student as an authoritative and independent consumer. The effects of such images on child-parent relationships in Canadian homes require further study, although the work of Cynthia Comacchio, Lisa Jacobson, and Allison Pugh suggest that children’s consumer desires have caused—and do cause—considerable strain within families.\(^{35}\) As Jacobson notes, the parenting style advised by many experts and educators required mothers and fathers to recognize their children’s consumer desires and become more democratic or risk alienating their offspring.\(^{36}\)

Ultimately, Eaton’s believed high school students were as mature as adults. During the Second World War, when boys could enlist to fight in Europe before turning eighteen, Eaton’s asserted that “17½ was considered ‘old enough’” to make adult choices; “high school kids stopped being children” during the war, the company insisted.\(^{37}\) It followed that if they were mature enough to don uniforms in defence of their country, high school students were also mature enough to be recognized as consumers in their own right. While others voiced concerns about juvenile delinquency, the fate of “latch-key” kids left alone while mothers worked in war industries, and young people’s postwar employment prospects, Eaton’s expressed confidence in its Councillors and Executives, calling high school students “literate, educated, exuberant, intelligent, and capable.”\(^{38}\) The students noticed; in 1944 several Executives told advisers that Eaton’s “seemed to have greater faith in students than any other large organization.”\(^{39}\) The company’s optimistic image was part of the persona designed to increase Eaton’s share of the teenaged market.

The records available suggest that in the 1940s and 1950s the Councillors and Executives chosen to be “truly representative of the Canadian High School Youth,” in Eaton’s words, really represented an exclusive minority of Canadians in their teenaged years.\(^{40}\) As noted above, school enrolment figures meant that

\(^{33}\) AO, 229-162, Interview with Mr. J. A. Brockie, October 3, 1968.

\(^{34}\) AO, 229-151, Box 2, “Youth Unlimited: The Story of Eaton’s Junior Council and Executive,” undated.


\(^{39}\) AO, 229-151, Box 2, Eaton’s Junior Executive First Fall Questionnaire, 1944.

\(^{40}\) AO, 229-151, Box 2, p. 3, “Youth Unlimited: The Story of Eaton’s Junior Council and Executive,” undated.
Eaton’s was already choosing from among the country’s better-off by limiting membership to upper-year high school students. The autonomous high school student Eaton’s idealized was also English-speaking and white. Membership rolls and group photographs show that Councillors and Executives were exclusively of European heritage. In Montreal, the programme was run only in English, despite the large number of French-speaking high school students in the city. As a result, Councillors and Executives were students of the English Protestant school board and did not include many (if any) French-speaking Catholic students. In Toronto and Winnipeg, however, the groups did have representatives from Catholic schools. In these cities, both private schools and technical schools also had representatives, suggesting that the company was trying to ensure that students from different economic groups were included. In Winnipeg, surviving Junior Executive application forms indicate that in the early 1950s Executives came from both middle-class and working-class households; fathers’ occupations for the group of Executives during the 1951-1952 school year included professionals, white-collar workers, skilled tradesmen, and labourers. While the list was diverse, it notably did not include any unemployed men—or women. Eaton’s exclusion of women’s employment from its considerations also reflects a middle-class assumption that the students’ mothers would not be working outside the home and that a student’s socio-economic status was derived from the father’s job, not the mother’s.

The commercial persona of an autonomous teenaged consumer helped Eaton’s to justify its direct communication with, and appeal to, high school students. The Council and Executive programme also relied on a considerable degree of cooperation from the schools (20 in Toronto and more than a dozen in Winnipeg), and Eaton’s employees worked hard to maintain these relationships in the face of concerns that the retailer might be seen to be taking advantage of or corrupting students. The application process was designed to garner goodwill from schools by fitting into the existing institutional power structure. Group advisers contacted local high school principals and guidance counsellors each spring to solicit their assistance in selecting the next year’s Councillors and Executives from among the student body. Advisers were reminded at their joint meeting in May 1950 that “all selections [for school representation on the councils] must have the authorization of Principal and staff.” Eaton’s officials knew that the company’s activities in the schools would be better received if the students chosen were well-liked by their teachers. At some stores former members were allowed to nominate future members; in these cases the selection process allowed Eaton’s to claim that they were involving the students in the selection of their own representatives, creating a sense that the process was somewhat democratic or an expression of popular will. By employing the school’s hierarchy and recognizing peer authority, Eaton’s inserted itself into high school culture. Its success in Toronto was evident when, after the first few years of the programme, Jack Brockie could rely solely on word

41 AO, 229-198, p. 9, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Junior Council and Junior Executive Advisers held at Toronto May 30, 31, and June 1, 1950.”
of mouth at the schools to garner sufficient applications for the next year’s crop of Councillors and Executives.

Despite its success at convincing schools to elect representatives, Eaton’s officials were often aware that the company might be criticized for running its programme through the schools. Council advisers were warned to design their activities carefully, because “school principals will always ... want to guard against the exploitation of students for commercial purposes.”

Specific complaints about Eaton’s programme either were not recorded or have not survived. However, the programme advisers made passing references to conflicts between Eaton’s and the schools. There is at least one example of a school ending its relationship with Eaton’s. St. Andrew’s College, a private boys’ school in Toronto, had a student representative on the Junior Executive in the 1940s, but, as a Public Relations Office staffer noted in a memo about displaying Eaton’s sports equipment in schools, St. Andrew’s “discontinued this as they felt it was too commercial for their school.”

The minutes from the Junior Council and Executive Representative Meeting in May 1948 recorded a similar problem with school authorities. While those present believed Eaton’s received greater publicity from sporting events than from other social events such as dances, the minutes noted that “some groups ... are prevented from tying in with various sporting events because of the opposition from local school authorities.” It is unclear from the records whether school authorities were opposed to commercial sponsorship generally or to Eaton’s in particular.

In response to these criticisms, Eaton’s staff worked hard to cultivate good relations with school administrators. In some cases they did so by sponsoring school events. At several stores the company created a Band Box—a portable sound system equipped with current popular recordings—which Junior Executives could reserve for school dances. Eaton’s also printed tickets, posters, and programmes free of charge for school events—and included the store’s name on each one. The Toronto store created class timetables and circulated them to students in participating schools during the first week of classes. Council advisers were encouraged to pursue these opportunities to put the company name in front of students’ eyes because, while “board of education rules do not permit any commercialism in the schools proper,” the schools “turn a blind eye on this type of advertising that we are doing.”

From Eaton’s head office in Toronto, Jack Brockie also cultivated personal relationships with principals and school board officials to ensure the programme’s success. In September 1947, C. W. Robb, Superintendent of the Toronto District

43 AO, 229-151, Box 2, Merchandise Display 1952-1956, “Re: Prep Shop at College Street Store,” memo from W. J. Bundy, Public Relations Department, to J. A. Brockie, 1953.
44 AO, 229-151, Box 2, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Junior Council and Junior Executive Advisers held at Toronto May 1948.”
45 The meeting minutes in Brockie’s files suggest that the Band Box was popular; different students requested its use at nearly every meeting between January and April 1947, for example. See AO, 229-198, Junior Executive Bulletin, January 29, 1947.
46 AO, 229-198, pp. 10-11, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Junior Council and Junior Executive Advisers held at Toronto May 30, 31, and June 1, 1950.”
School Board, advised Brockie amicably in a letter to send any Eaton’s promotions directly to school principals. Teachers, he informed Brockie, were not permitted to circulate “material of an advertising nature” in their classrooms, according to the policy of the Toronto School Board. Despite board regulations prohibiting advertising in the schools, Robb went on to say that “the Board of Education has been indebted to the T. Eaton Company on so many occasions in the past that I am of the opinion that this rule could be stretched a bit.” Although Robb did not specifically state how Eaton’s had helped the school board, it is clear that the company had succeeded in generating enough goodwill with some school authorities that Robb was willing to permit Eaton’s to promote its goods and activities to students when he might normally restrict such activities. On Brockie’s request, the Assistant Principal at Malvern Collegiate Institute in Toronto, Milton Jewell, spoke to advisers in 1946, reminding them to “sell [school administrators] on the idea that we are doing something for the school.” To that end, stores held events such as Principals’ Meetings—where Councillors and Executives invited their principals to dinner to meet store managers—planned “in an attempt to tie-in and cooperate closely” with school officials.

Brockie’s close relationship with Superintendent Robb also proved beneficial when a school board east of Toronto opposed the company’s attempts to form a Junior Executive in its city. The Toronto School Board wrote to school authorities in Belleville, Ontario, endorsing the programme and convincing them to allow Eaton’s to proceed in their schools. The minutes of the Junior Executive advisers conference in 1946 indicate that other stores also encountered unnamed “problems” with local school authorities. The delegates decided to “make up a confidential report of these individual situations with information on how they were handled” so that advisers could help each other avoid the perception that they were exploiting high school students. They also recommended the creation of a distinct “Junior Council” and “Junior Executive” stationery to be used “in conduction of school business for the Company.” The meeting minutes noted that this stationery would “keep any commercial taint out of Eaton’s dealings with the schools,” presumably because school officials would not see the Eaton’s name and logo on the letters, memos, and application forms associated with the programme.

Evidence suggests that the company did emphasize the educational value of the programme. Remembering the beginnings of the Junior Council in a public relations pamphlet written in 1960, the company admitted that its motivations to

47 AO, 229-151, Box 2, Letter from C. W. Robb, Superintendent of Secondary Schools, to J. A. Brockie, Merchandise Display Department, September 4, 1947.
49 AO, 229-198, p. 9, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Junior Council and Junior Executive Advisers held at Toronto May 30, 31, and June 1, 1950.”
50 AO, 229-151, Box 2, “Minutes from the Junior Executive Advisers’ Meeting, February 1947.”
51 AO, 229-198, “Minutes of Junior Executive Conference, August 14, 15, 16, 1946,” printed in Junior Executive Bulletin, 1947. No such report was found in the records.
52 AO, 229-151, “Recommendations for Approval from Minutes of Junior Council and Junior Executive advisers, May 19-21, 1947.”
start the councils were “not altogether altruistic in the beginning,” but claimed that the company quickly realized its “moral responsibility” to these students, “whose education could be greatly broadened through intimate contact with executive level representatives of the largest and most successful retailing enterprise in Canada.” Eaton’s growing focus on educational activities throughout the 1940s suggests the department store was trying to reconcile the idea of an opinionated and style-savvy student with some schools’ belief that their institutions should be havens from market activity. To counter these beliefs, Eaton’s emphasized that it wanted students to learn about consumer products and retail operations and portrayed the groups as facilitating “the informal equilateral exchange of information between bright, opinionated school ‘kids’ and knowledgeable, experienced business executives.” The groups’ meetings, discussed in detail below, were often intended to be a window into the retail world.

The educational tone of Eaton’s youth promotions was in keeping with a larger move by educators in the 1940s towards vocational guidance and hands-on job training. Canadian educators were debating ways to make high school education more relevant and appealing to older teenaged children. Experiential learning and vocational guidance were among the methods proposed by youth organizations, government-sponsored commissions, and federal agencies. While these recommendations usually focused on in-school activities, company officials and some school administrators believed programmes such as the Junior Council and Junior Executive provided an aligned educational service. Department stores had ready access to people who could teach students about the retail industry; Eaton’s pointed out; stores also had the means to employ students part-time, giving them a “big chance to get a real behind-the-scenes, first-hand look at some aspect of a trade, career or profession they may want to follow up later.” The educational value of this part-time labour is uncertain; indeed, some adults voiced concerns in the 1930s and 1940s that adolescents’ jobs were “dead-end,” with little potential or financial merit. However, in the context of the greater focus on vocational guidance in the postwar years, it is possible that attitudes towards part-time student labour were changing. Certainly the fact that Eaton’s council programme operated in several major Canadian cities for more than 20 years suggests that school authorities saw some educational merit in the arrangement. However, Eaton’s image also stood to benefit; by presenting itself as an educator, Eaton’s transformed the teenaged consumer into embodied evidence of the company’s goodwill and dedication to young people, ultimately putting the students to work for the corporate image.

Eaton’s promotional material, in constructing its public image, often spoke of an authoritative high school student without distinguishing between girls and

54 Ibid.
55 Keshen, Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers, pp. 219-221; R. D. Gidney, From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario’s Schools (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 23-24; Comacchio, Dominion of Youth, pp. 189-209.
56 “Teenagers Club,” Mayfair, August 1945, p. 95.
57 Comacchio, Dominion of Youth, pp. 129-159.
boys; however, an examination of weekly meetings reveals that the company commodified the Councillors and Executives in ways that both reflected and reinforced the gendered hierarchy of the department store. Two photographs included in Eaton’s 1947 corporate history *The Story of a Store* point to the company’s distinct visions for girls and boys (see Figures 1 and 2). The girls, Junior Councillors at the Toronto store in 1946, are admiring merchandise, captured seemingly unaware of the photographer as they look at clothes and chat with each other. It seems more of a social gathering than a formal meeting. Several of the girls are engrossed in the products, suggesting their role as shoppers, their eagerness to opine about the company’s offerings, and, simultaneously, their potential to behave irrationally in the presence of consumer goods. If they could not pay attention at meetings, imagine these girls shopping! In contrast, the boys, members of the 1946 Toronto Junior Executive, are captured at attention, their eyes mostly drawn to a fellow member standing at the left of the image. As the name of their group suggests, they are adopting the stature of business executives at a board meeting, with formal dress and papers and no Eaton’s merchandise in sight. This image complies exactly with the advice Brockie received from Malvern Collegiate Institute Principal Milton Jewell, who recommended in the early 1940s that the Executive be “patterned after a directors’ meeting” to foster a “business

![Figures 1 and 2: The Toronto Junior Council (top) and Junior Executive (above), 1946, from *The Story of a Store: The History of Eaton’s from 1869* (Toronto: T. Eaton Company, 1947).](image-url)
attitude” that he believed would serve male students well in the future.58 The Junior Executives appear to be running the department store rather than shopping in it.

These depictions of young female “shoppers” and young male “managers” present a juvenile version of the gender dynamic played out daily on department store sales floors. As scholars such as Gail Reekie, Cynthia Wright, Joy Parr, and Donica Belisle have demonstrated, department store customers were, for the most part, women, while department store managers were typically men.59 Furthermore, female shoppers—despite, or perhaps because of, their presence in the marketplace—were often depicted as irrational and irresponsible, neglecting family duties and thrift to pursue unnecessary consumer desires.60 The image of the Councillors beguiled by consumer goods certainly differed from the company’s written descriptions of high school girls as astute and authoritative shoppers, as “a group searching for clothes suitable to their school and social life, a group with strong likes and dislikes and a good idea of what they wanted.”61 While written records emphasized the calculated consumer savvy of the high school crowd, the image of the Councillors suggests a more gender-specific and narrow corporate vision for teenage girls.

Shopping was commonly understood and portrayed as a feminine pursuit; however, Eaton’s also saw boys on the Executives as current and future consumers and sought to tie their high school student lifestyle closely to consumer goods. The boys’ consumer persona required a different approach. Lisa Jacobson argues that the boy consumer who appeared in American advertising campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s combined consumer desire with business principles, saving money to purchase toys and sporting equipment and influencing his parents’ purchases.62 The image of the boy as a master persuader who acquired what he wanted through his own know-how and effort contained consumer desire within acceptable masculine characteristics. Similarly, Eaton’s avoided making explicit references to boys as shoppers. The image of high school boys seated at a boardroom table conveys the sense that Executives were mastering the retail world in a masculine way, discussing aspects of production or merchandising instead of touching and feeling garments, as the girls are pictured doing.

These gendered distinctions between girl and boy consumers are also reflected in an analysis of minutes from the groups’ mostly gender-segregated weekly meetings in the late 1940s and early 1950s.63 At first glance, many of

58 AO, 229-151, File 71: Junior Executive and Council 1942-1945, Memorandum from M. H. Jewell, Assistant Principal at Malvern Collegiate Institute, to Jack Brockie, Head of Merchandise Display Department, undated.
62 Jacobson, Raising Consumers, pp. 93-126.
63 This sample includes minutes from approximately 60 meetings that took place at stores in Toronto,
the Councillors’ and Executives’ activities at weekly meetings were quite similar, involving a routine of announcements, guest speakers, reporting on past events and planning future ones, reviewing and commenting on store merchandise, drinking Coca-Cola, and distributing pay envelopes. However, examining the frequency and emphasis of particular activities illustrates the advisers’ efforts to glean information from the students and to enlighten them as to the retail industry, and it reveals the distinctly gendered value that Eaton’s attached to Councillors and Executives. Both were consumers, but Eaton’s valued Councillors more for their product opinions and advertising potential, while the Executives’ activities were more focused on making high school boys retail apprentices.

For example, girls were far more likely to spend time looking at and commenting on specific Eaton’s merchandise during their meetings, reflecting the company’s desire to encourage female students to shop and to use them to reach a wider audience of high school girls. Advisers encouraged Eaton’s apparel buyers to bring selected items from their departments and ask the girls—and less often, the boys—for their feedback. Nearly a third of the line items from the Junior Council meeting minutes sampled described focus-group-style sessions in which girls were asked for their opinions on clothing, shoes, or accessories. In contrast, feedback sessions on clothing and other merchandise comprised less than five per cent of items discussed at Junior Executive meetings. On occasion, Councillors were given samples of clothing to wear. For example, at a May 1948 meeting of the Toronto Junior Council, Mr. Sharpless from Eaton’s shoe department asked that six councillors be fitted with a new style of saddle shoe. The minutes reported that “the girls are going to wear these shoes to school all the time,” to show them off to their friends and tell them where to get their own pairs. These kinds of activities turned the Councillors into walking billboards for Eaton’s merchandise. Jack Brockie and fellow staff advisers saw girls’ endorsements as advertising that money simply could not buy.

While male Executives were less likely to review merchandise during meetings, both boys and girls participated in frequent written surveys that asked for the students’ opinions on everything from their career plans to their favourite date outfits. Company officials believed surveys provided valuable information about teenaged consumer preferences, regardless of sex. While Councillors participated in questionnaires more often than the Executives in the minutes analysed here, Jack Brockie’s files also refer to regular Junior Executive surveys conducted in the early 1940s, suggesting that some of boys’ participation in surveys was not reported in the minutes.

Montreal, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton between December 1946 and April 1947, January and May 1948, and January 1950 to January 1951. Approximately 35 were Executive meetings, 20 were Council meetings, and five were joint meetings.

It is unclear from the records exactly how many students worked in the stores or in what capacity. Their pay rates and hours are not noted in the programme’s records, and Eaton’s employee records are currently sealed.

AO, 229-151, Box 3, Meeting of the Toronto Junior Council, May 1, 1948.

AO, 229-151, Box 3, Letter from Jack Brockie, Merchandise Display Department, to J. P. Heffernan, Branch Stores Advertising, March 27, 1947.
Meeting minutes reveal that the company demanded as much precise detail from the Executives as from the Councillors in these exercises. Eaton’s asked about their preferred stores, clothing fabrics, colours, and brands, as well as how much they spent on clothing each year and what they found appealing about specific advertisements. Girls were asked to list their favourite colours and materials for suits, dresses, and formal gowns. Boys were asked what kind of clothes they typically wore in different situations. “What do you wear at home studying?” the company asked Executives in Winnipeg, followed by five other questions about what boys might wear “out on a movie and coke date” or “when out with the gang.” While the boys’ answers varied little from “sweater and pants,” the questions demonstrate the company’s desire to know what items made up the typical high school wardrobe, so they could be sure to stock them in their stores. Further questions asked the Councillors and Executives to list their three favourite places to shop for eleven different clothing items, with explanations of their preferences. Eaton’s knew boys were buying, and the company did not hesitate to ask them about their shopping habits.

Fashion shows were another regular activity for both Junior Councillors and Executives—one that both commodified and gendered the high school students. Fashion shows suited several of the company’s diverse goals, allowing Eaton’s to advertise company merchandise, bring high school students into the stores to watch their peers model, and teach Councillors and Executives about a particular method of merchandise promotion. Brockie’s files suggest that more than a third of the programme budget was dedicated to fashion shows held several times during the school year. This money was justified, Brockie noted, because the shows had “received so much favourable comment, both from Staff and Students, and the Board of Education have not frowned on this type of publicity, rather labelling it as ‘Educational’ in preparing students for the Business World.” Both in terms of advertising and branding, the young people who participated in fashion shows generated value for Eaton’s.

However, boys and girls filled very different roles in the preparation and execution of fashion shows, despite the fact that planning the shows occupied an equal amount of meeting time for Councillors and Executives. Modelling was almost exclusively a female activity. Eaton’s selected fashion show models from among the Councillors and photographed them in store merchandise for newspaper advertisements. In addition to participating in semi-annual (and sometimes more regular) large events, Councillors occasionally held more informal fashion shows during their weekly meetings, displaying outfits and practising their modelling skills for each other. For example, a small show took place at an Edmonton Junior Council meeting in 1950, when Miss L. Foster of the “Teen Shop” brought 15 dresses to the meeting. “Each girl modelled one style for the others,” the minutes reported, adding that “the girls had a delightful time, both in modelling and in

69 AO, 229-151, Box 3, “Survey No. 4: Teen-Age Shopping Habits and Advertising,” undated.
70 AO, 229-151, File 84: Merchandise Office 1944, “Budget Notes,” July 4, 1944.
making frank comments ... about the garment and the model!” The Hamilton Junior Council adviser reported in November 1947 that the girls were practising their modelling every week.

While Councillors displayed the merchandise, boys more often helped to produce the show for an audience of their high school peers, acting in the more masculine roles of ticket seller, disc jockey, and escort. When boys appeared on stage, it was in a secondary role. In 1947, three Toronto Executives “dressed in tails, escorted the three lovely models in formals up the runway,” while at a 1950 fashion show boys from the Toronto Executive appeared “dressed in Rugby Uniforms to add atmosphere.” Another scene featured “fellows and girls” in “lumberjackets, weskits, trousers, and tailored skirts and slacks.” Male models tended to wear sporting gear or outdoor, casual clothing and were positioned to ensure that girls were the centre of attention. In another case, the Junior Executives in Toronto planned to invite peers to a fashion show Stag Party, where merchandise would be displayed on mannequins, but not modelled. While boys in tuxedos walked the models down the catwalk, some council advisers seemed reluctant to make boys the object of others’ gazes, although some boys did model clothing in Eaton’s newspaper advertisements.

The Hamilton Junior Executive appears to be the only group that hosted and modelled in its own fashion show without girls on stage. The details of this show are unknown; however, when this all-male fashion show was reported at an Executive adviser’s meeting in 1947, several of the other advisers expressed doubts that the boys in their groups would volunteer to participate in an all-boys show. Many Executives did volunteer to distribute fashion show tickets in their high schools. In one case, the chairman of the Hamilton Executive offered a prize to the boy who distributed the most tickets to his friends, placing the boys in the role of competitive salesmen and placing girls under the gaze of many of their male (and female) peers. The roles of ticket salesman and escort were deemed more masculine, allowing boys to be involved in fashion shows without actually modelling merchandise.

Instead, boys were more likely to engage in activities that exposed them to the workings of the corporate world, reflecting the company’s vision of Executives as future retail workers as well as Eaton’s customers. While girls and boys both engaged in some of these activities, such as writing advertising copy for prizes,
designing floor displays, and touring store departments, Executives spent more
time learning about store operations and listening to retail industry members than
Councillors. These encounters were not only more frequent, but placed more
emphasis on business operations than on selecting and purchasing products.

For example, in a two-month period in 1947, Junior Executives in four different
stores heard ten presentations about operations of various Eaton’s departments,
from Receiving and Customer Service to Merchandising, Advertising, and Staff
Welfare.78 Between January and April of 1947, the Winnipeg Executive hosted six
guest speakers and the Toronto Executive, seven.79 These presentations provided
boys with insight into sales strategy, merchandising, and advertising. In 1947 the
supervisor of the Shoe Department in the Toronto store spoke to the Executives
about the way shoes were priced, the benefits and drawbacks of high-heeled
ladies’ shoes, and the names of Canadian shoe designers.80 This information—
particularly in regard to women’s footwear—assumed that the boys would be
selling shoes, not buying them. Eaton’s offered both boys and girls sales training
and part-time employment in store departments, but boys’ activities underlined
the possibility that they could pursue a career—and not just a job—in retail.

Nearly 10 per cent of minute items noted during Junior Executive meetings
concerned field trips to different Eaton’s departments and other local businesses.
Tours of local businesses exposed the boys to these firms’ products and
operations. In 1947 the Winnipeg Junior Executive visited the Gerhard Kennedy
Sportswear plant and the Eaton Mail Order Building. The Montreal group visited
the Eaton’s Clothing Factory and a scarf manufacturer. The Hamilton group
visited the Firestone plant, and the Edmonton Executives toured the offices of
the Edmonton Journal newspaper. At the Gerhard Kennedy Sportswear plant in
Winnipeg, Executives were shown bolts of cloth and different sewing machines.
They watched demonstrations and learned how styles and colours were chosen
for manufacture. However, Gerhard Kennedy also “urged the Junior Executive to
make known their wants and needs in clothes so that manufacturers and retailers
might supply those needs.”81 Field trips were both education and advertisement,
since they gave retailers a captive audience and an opportunity to establish a
closer relationship with young consumers, while also teaching them about the
way businesses operated and the skills they might need to join the industry.

In contrast, the field trips and speakers addressing the Councillors more often
assumed high school girls were shoppers and future housewives. The sample
of Councillors’ meeting minutes analysed here mention only two field trips—
both to Eaton’s departments. In Winnipeg, girls visiting the Eaton’s Research
Bureau were reportedly very interested in the way the mostly male employees
scientifically tested different materials before they received the “stamp of

79 The minutes collected in the Junior Executive Bulletin include an additional 15 guest speakers, addressing
groups in Montreal, Hamilton, Edmonton, and Calgary.
81 AO, 229-198, Report from Junior Executive Meeting, Winnipeg, March 8, 1947, printed in Junior
Executive Bulletin.
approval from Eaton’s.”

Brand awareness and assurances of quality were front and centre, while the skills required to work in the Research Bureau were not discussed. When guest speakers from various departments addressed the Toronto Councillors, their presentations centred on collecting articles for the girls’ hope chests, selecting home furnishings, and applying make-up—all focused on girls’ position as consumers. In contrast to the Executives’ meeting with company buyers—where prices and sales strategies were sometimes discussed—Councillors were taught how a product could be used and cared for. For example, after a thorough talk about the diversity and proper care of girdles (with samples for the girls to examine), the Toronto Junior Councillors were invited to be fitted in the Foundations Garment department, linking their new product knowledge to the point of sale. While many of the guest speakers who visited the Councillors were women in business and other occupations, these presentations rarely offered career advice to the female students.

Eaton’s corporate records show that, whether they were listening to guest speakers, walking the catwalk, working in store departments, or visiting local businesses, the high school students who served as Councillors and Executives were sounding boards and sources of information, company promoters and retail apprentices, labourers and customers. At a moment when a growing minority of adolescents were enrolled in urban high schools beyond the legal minimum age, Canada’s largest department store went to school, so to speak, to cultivate the confidence of teenaged consumers. The company focused its considerable resources and cultural clout in an effort to achieve several goals. First, it sought to glean information from popular high school students about current trends among their peers. It also aimed to reach a wider advertising audience through these student representatives. Finally, it sought to teach them about products and about the company, both to encourage consumption and to train them as part-time workers and potential future employees.

In all these activities, Eaton’s commodified the middle-class, white high school student. Dressed in matching blazers with Eaton’s lapel pins, the students were emblems of the company in the stores and their schools, generating valuable goodwill (and perhaps some animosity) for the corporation among educators. The company wanted to foster the image that it was providing education and supervised entertainment for high school students, creating the consumer persona of a self-directed and savvy high school student keen to participate in the market and to learn from retail experts. Councillors and Executives were youthful faces behind the counters in some departments, putting their appearance to work to generate sales. For company marketing staff eager to tap an emerging market, the groups’ weekly meetings were an opportunity to coolhunt and learn about students’ desires and youthful trends. The company thanked the students for helping interpret the shifting desires of high school consumers, while crediting itself for being the retailer that best understood young Canadians.

82 AO, 229-198, Junior Council Minutes, Community Chest 1950, meeting on December 2, 1950.
83 Toronto Junior Council meetings, February 14 and October 5, 1948.
84 Toronto Junior Council meeting, February 28, 1948.
While Eaton’s wanted both boys and girls to shop at its stores, this persona of an autonomous high school consumer was complicated by the distinctly gendered value that advisers and store managers saw in the Councillors and Executives. The groups’ activities in the 1940s and early 1950s reflect the company’s belief that Councillors were better suited to promoting products by modelling and shopping, while the programme for Executives was tailored to groom boys for the “business world.” These distinctions were subtle; boys and girls participated in many of the same activities, with advisers placing a different emphasis on the purpose or outcome. In both cases, Eaton’s officials hoped to generate sales and goodwill by seeming to prepare students for roles as housewives or salesmen.

Beyond Eaton’s bottom line, the Junior Council and Executive programme is significant in several ways. The corporate records demonstrate the historical longevity of contemporary marketing tools such as coolhunting, offering a rare glimpse into the written motives and “backstage” thinking behind this public relations and advertising strategy. Eaton’s relationship with schools—particularly in Toronto and Winnipeg—also points to a close relationship between educators and some businesspeople, some of whom saw themselves working towards common educational goals. Further exploration of these collaborations will enrich our understanding of the role of schooling in both the process of growing up and the perpetuation and growth of the consumer economy. Crucially, the programme also points to the highly gendered way in which retailers spoke about and targeted teenaged consumers, which largely replicated the prevailing gender roles of adults at the time, echoing Lisa Jacobson’s findings that retailers did not ignore boys, but merely addressed them in distinct ways designed to appeal to—and foster—their masculinity. Female Councillors, on the other hand, learned early that their value lay in their appearance and their pocketbooks.

By claiming to be the “Store for Young Canada,” as Eaton’s did throughout the 1940s, the company was simultaneously responding to and shaping this market segment. The corporation’s policies and practices point to the utility of emerging theoretical perspectives on childhood and consumer culture that reject seeing consumption as solely a liberating or manipulative force in young lives, and instead focus on the ways in which the marketplace has contributed to understandings of childhood in different historical contexts. Certainly, aspects of liberation and manipulation shaped Eaton’s very understanding of the teenaged consumer it sought to woo. The company’s decision to cultivate relationships with particular groups of largely white, middle-class, urban young Canadians helped to define an emerging life-stage, ensuring that the transition from childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood was bounded and punctuated by growing participation in the consumer marketplace. By the time the Baby Boom generation entered high school, retailers such as Eaton’s saw the teenaged consumer as a well-established market segment. While the Boomers were more numerous, it was in fact their high-school-aged predecessors in the 1940s whom retailers such as Eaton’s first saw as teenaged consumers, paving the way for the Boomers’ explosive buying power.