

## The Changing World of Children's Consumption

A nation of kids and they Drive purchases: Kids influence 62% of family SUV and minivan purchases! Nickelodeon owns 50% of the K2-11 GRP's [Gross Rating Points] in Kids' Commercial TV.

—From a Nickelodeon ad,  
with a smiling kid in an SUV

The typical American child is now immersed in the consumer marketplace to a degree that dwarfs all historical experience. At age one, she's watching *Teletubbies* and eating the food of its "promo partners" Burger King and McDonald's. Kids can recognize logos by eighteen months, and before reaching their second birthday, they're asking for products by brand name. By three or three and a half, experts say, children start to believe that brands communicate their personal qualities, for example, that they're cool, or strong, or smart. Even before starting school, the likelihood of having a television in their bedroom is 25 percent, and their viewing time is just over two hours a day. Upon arrival at the schoolhouse steps, the typical first grader can evoke 200 brands. And he or she has already accumulated an unprecedented number of possessions, beginning with an average of seventy new toys a year.

By age six and seven, girls are asking for the latest fashions, using nail polish, and singing pop music tunes. The day after the dELIA's clothing catalogue arrives in the mail, marketers report that "everyone brings their catalog to school" to talk about the products in it. (When I wrote those words dELIA's was hot; when they appear in print, who knows? Trends move at the speed of light in this world.) Eight-year-old boys are enjoying Budweiser commercials (the consistent favorite ad for this age group), World Wrestling Entertainment, and graphically violent video games.

Schools routinely ban the toy fads that sweep the market, from Power Rangers to Pokémon, on the grounds that they lead to fights, antisocial behavior, and disruption. The average eight to thirteen year old is watching over three and a half hours of television a day. American children view an estimated 40,000 commercials annually. They also make approximately 3,000 requests for products and services each year.

As kids age, they turn to teen culture, which is saturated with violence, alcohol, drugs, and guns. Teen media depict a manipulated and gratuitous sexuality, based on unrealistic body images, constraining gender stereotypes, and, all too frequently, the degradation of women. The dominant teen culture is also rife with materialism and preaches that if you're not rich, you're a loser. Adolescents are subjected to unremitting pressure to conform to the market's definition of cool. MTV has been the global leader in promoting these values, and its worldview has become pervasive among youth. And now, teen culture has migrated down to younger children. Eight and nine year olds watch MTV and BET (Black Entertainment Television), reality shows, and other prime-time fare ostensibly aimed at teens and adults. Marketers are deliberately investing children's culture with the themes and sensibilities that have worked with teens. As Betsy Frank, head of research for MTV Networks, explained, "If something works for MTV, it will also work for Nickelodeon." It's a widespread process, known as tweening.

### The Marketing Juggernaut

This commercialization of childhood is being driven by a number of factors, including broad social trends. But underlying them all is a marketing juggernaut characterized by growing reach, effectiveness, and audacity. One clue to the marketing mentality is industry language. It's a war out there. Those at whom ads are directed are "targets." When money is committed to an ad campaign it is referred to as "going against the target." Printed materials are called "collateral." Impromptu interviews with consumers are "intercepts." The industry is heavily into the metaphor of biological warfare, as in the terms "viral marketing" and "sending out a virus." Other conventions include "converting [a kid] into a user" (a phrase from drug culture), delivering the "eyeballs," and becoming "top of mind." There's not much doubt about who's winning this war either. When Nickelodeon tells its advertisers that it "owns kids aged 2-12," the boast is closer to the mark than most of us realize.

The companies' successes are partly attributable to their enormous outlays of money. James McNeal, the nation's most influential estimator of the size of the children's market, has calculated that by 2004, total advertising and marketing expenditures directed at children reached \$15 billion, a stunning rise from the mere \$100 million in television advertising spent in 1983.

Researchers have chopped up the 52 million plus children in the age-twelve-and-under demographic into discrete age, gender, ethnic, and product segments, each with tailored messages. Nearly every segment warrants a yearly conference. For those who want to capture Hispanic youth, there's the Annual Hispanic KidPower meeting, which promises to unlock the special secrets of the most rapidly growing market segment in the country. The Annual KidPower Food and Beverage conference teaches participants how to sell more junk food to kids. There are conferences devoted to teens, to tweens, to Latin America, Asia, and Europe. African American children sometimes get special attention, as do themes such as girl power or technology. Hundreds of representatives of the client companies come to hear the latest findings about what kids are up to from researchers, psychologists, and ad agency reps. At one conference, I was treated to the pitch of the Gepetto Group, which created a simulated safari video, *The Nature of Kids*. The animals, of course, are children, defined as "nature's most elusive creature." The narrator has a British colonial accent, to conjure up images of safari suit and pith helmet. The kids slink through the jungle on all fours, guzzling soda and eating toaster pop-ups, speaking their own commercially inspired lingo. They're a species apart. But have no fear. Gepetto, the intrepid hunter, can help. It has snared and dissected these strange creatures we call our children and is ready to sell that information to anyone with cash to spend. Its representative promises to teach the client "how to get a grip on cool all the time" or do an assessment of kids' innermost dreams, aspirations, and fears.

Other companies have less elaborate come-ons but offer similar messages. Their workshop titles include "Emotional Branding: Maximizing the Appeal of Your Brand to Hispanic Youth," "Purchasing Power: Capturing Your Share of the Tween Wallet," and "Seeing the World Through Kids' Eyes: An Intimate Peek into the Minds and Hearts of Kids." Companies promise to "create an experience so engaging that the consumer won't have another option but to pay attention to it."

The growth of specialized kid expertise is made possible by a deluge of industry-generated research. Companies have created scores of surveys, polls, and other research instruments. They've gone anthropological,

using ethnographic methods that scrutinize the most intimate details of children's lives. Marketers are videotaping children in their private spaces, providing in-depth analysis of the rituals of daily life. They are taking to the streets, to stores, and even into schools to observe and record. Researchers are paying adults whom kids trust, such as coaches, clergy, and youth workers, to elicit information from them. Online, they're offering money, products, and prizes directly to kids in return for saleable consumer information.

Once the research has been done, message crafting begins. Ads depict kid-friendly worlds free of annoying parents and teachers. They rely on "attitude" and use increasing daring in terms of shock value or sexuality. There's a growing sense of license. Marketing is also being delivered in new ways, as stealth, guerrilla, and peer-to-peer techniques have taken hold. Companies enlist children to market to each other at school, in chat rooms, on playgrounds, even inside their homes. Marketing to children is occurring almost everywhere—at market festivals, concerts, and public schools, which have been a major staging ground for advertisers in the past decade. Trusted social institutions, such as the Girl Scouts and Boys and Girls Clubs, are teaming up with marketers. When the *Los Angeles Times* decided to create a children's version of its well-known book fair, it turned, tellingly, to a marketing group. All the while, the industry claims that it is empowering kids and promoting their self-esteem.

A recent poll by the Center for a New American Dream reveals that children are well aware, and even critical, of these efforts. Among those aged nine to fourteen, 63 percent expressed concern that there is too much advertising that tries to get kids to buy things, 74 percent say "it's too bad you have to buy certain things to be cool," and 81 percent believe that "lots of kids place way too much importance on buying things." Fifty-seven percent agree that they sometimes feel they spend too much time trying to "get their parents to buy you things rather than doing fun things with them." And the same fraction worry that "advertising that tries to get kids to buy things causes trouble between kids and parents."

### The Explosion of Youth Spending

Companies are advertising because kids are buying. Every half-second, somewhere in the world another Barbie is sold. More than 120 million kids worldwide have watched Children's Television Workshop. McDonald's, despite its current woes, still manages to attract 8 percent of the

American population every day, and a fifth of its business is in Happy Meals. Whether it's music, food, movies, video games, apparel, footwear, toys, television, sports, school supplies, retailing, e-tailing, health and beauty products, consumer electronics, entertainment, or travel, there is now a thriving children's market segment.

Children's purchasing power has risen rapidly. McNeal reports that children aged four to twelve made \$6.1 billion in purchases in 1989, \$23.4 billion in 1997, and \$30.0 billion in 2002, an increase of 400 percent. The number one spending category, at a third of the total, is for sweets, snacks, and beverages. Toys are number two and apparel is growing fast. Older kids, aged twelve to nineteen, spend even more: they accounted for \$170 billion of personal spending in 2002, or a weekly average of \$101 per person. This teen market is important because the children's market tracks it, and because trends and styles now migrate quickly from adolescents to kids. Teens have become a leading indicator for tween and child behavior.

Children are becoming shoppers at an earlier age. Six to twelve year olds are estimated to visit stores two to three times per week and to put six items into the shopping cart each time they go. Eighty percent of them shop regularly with their parents, a change necessitated by the decline of stay-at-home mothers. But kids are also going solo. McNeal estimates that one in four make trips to stores alone before they enter elementary school and that the median age for independent trips is eight. Youthful shoppers are now often buying for family needs, particularly in single-parent households. The proliferation of children in stores is also leading to changes in retail environments. In 1996, the world's first mall catering exclusively to children opened in Alpharetta, Georgia. It has been enormously successful, and its "kids' village" concept has been copied around the country. Expect one on your local interstate before too long.

### "Kid-fluence"

The more children shop, the more voice they have in parental purchases. In the industry, this is called the influence market, and it is enormous. McNeal estimates that children aged four to twelve directly influenced \$330 billion of adult purchasing in 2004 and "evoked" another \$340 billion. And he believes that influence spending is growing at 20 percent per year. Global estimates for tween influence topped \$1 trillion in 2002. That persuasive power is why Nickelodeon, the number one television chan-

nel for kids, has had Ford Motor Company, Target, Embassy Suites, and the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism as its advertisers. (This explains why your child has been asking for an SUV, a vacation in the Bahamas, and a Robert Graves teapot.)

Children's influence is being driven by a number of factors, including changes in parenting style. Older generations were more authoritarian, believing that they knew what was best for their kids. The famous "children should be seen and not heard" adage also meant that parents made most buying decisions. Baby boom and later generations of parents have been far more willing to give voice and choice, to see consumer decisions as "learning opportunities." (Cheerios or Fruit Loops? Cherry Popsicle or grape?) As one marketer explained to me, "When I was a kid I got to pick the color of the car. Kids nowadays get to pick the car." While that may be an exaggeration, there is little doubt that parental attitudes have changed markedly. One industry estimate finds that 67 percent of car purchases by parents are influenced by children. Marketers have put tremendous effort into discovering just how far kid influence has permeated into household purchasing dynamics and for what types of products. And what they have found is that for a growing array of expenditures, children, not parents, are making choices.

What's more, kids' opinions are solicited from the earliest ages. According to a consumer panel run by New York agency Griffin Bacal, 100 percent of the parents of children aged two to five agreed that their children have a major influence on their food and snack purchases. For video and book choices, the rate of major influence was 80 percent, and for restaurants, clothes, and health and beauty products, it stood at 50 percent. The Roper Youth Report has found that among six and seven year olds, 30 percent choose their own grocery store food items, 15 percent choose their toys and games, and 33 percent make fast food and candy decisions. As kids age, their influence grows.

Food is an area where influence marketing and the decline of parental control has been most pronounced. Consider the case of Fruit Roll-ups, a phenomenally successful snack food represented by Saatchi and Saatchi's Kid Connection. When the product was introduced, the ads had both kid and mom appeal. For moms, they called attention to the fruit aspect of the snack. But over time, the agency realized that this "dual messaging" was unnecessary. As a former Saatchi employee explained to me: "For years we used to say 10 percent fruit juice. And finally we're just like, okay, forget it. Who are we kidding? . . . That was also a conscious effort to move toward direct kid marketing and not even worrying about Mom. Just take

her out of the equation because the nag factor is so strong on something like that, that you can just take advantage of that."

Parental time pressure and longer working hours have also driven this trend. Time-starved households have become easy prey for marketers, whose research shows that parents who spend less time with their children will spend more money on them. "Guilt money," as they call it, came up in almost all my discussions about why kids have so much influence now. Research done by one of my students is consistent with this view. She found that parents who spent more hours working bought more discretionary items such as toys, videos, and books for their children. This effect is in addition to the fact that the additional income from working more also leads to more spending. By contrast, parents who spent more time with their children bought fewer of these items. The amount of extra spending was larger for mothers than fathers. And it was greater for toys than for other items. In higher-income families, spending was even more sensitive to time spent with children. These results do not show that parental guilt is motivating purchases, but marketers' belief in the power of guilt, and their ability to exploit it, remains strong.

Time pressure operates in other ways as well. Parents have less time to cajole kids to eat products they don't like or to return rejected purchases to stores. This is part of why 89 percent of parents of tweens report that they ask their children's opinions about products they are about to buy for them. Kids are also technologically savvy and eagerly seek out consumer information. Many parents now believe that their children know more about products and brands than they do, and they rely on that knowledge.

### "Bonded to Brands"

These days, when kids ask, they ask for particular brands. A 2001 Nickelodeon study found that the average ten year old has memorized 300 to 400 brands. Among eight to fourteen year olds, 92 percent of requests are brand specific, and 89 percent of kids agree that "when I find a brand I like, I tend to stick with it." A 2000 Griffin Bacal study found that nearly two-thirds of mothers thought their children were brand aware by age three, and one-third said it happened at age two. Kids have clear brand preferences, they know which brands are cool, they covet them, and they pay attention to the ads for them. Today's tweens are the most brand-conscious generation in history.

The increased salience of brands is a predictable outcome of kids' greater exposure to ads. Companies spend billions to create positive brand associations for their products, attempting to connect them with culturally valued images, feelings, and sensibilities. This is especially true in the youth marketplace, where so many of the products are hardly differentiable without the labels. There's a copycat sameness to sodas, fast food, candy, athletic shoes, jeans, and even music and films. And in light of that, companies have to work overtime to establish brand identity and loyalty. They turn brands into "signs," pure symbolic entities, detached from specific products and functional characteristics. This has been a winning strategy, and youth have eagerly embraced an ethic of labels and logos. But brand value is a hard quality to sustain, especially in today's super-competitive environment. The intensification of what scholars Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson have dubbed "sign wars," that is, corporate competition centered on images, has led to an ever-accelerating spiral of changing symbolism and brand vulnerability. And that vulnerability fuels marketing innovation and sometimes desperation.

In what industry insiders call the "kidspace," much of the action has been in what is called brand extension. Products are inserted into a vast matrix of other products. There's the *Pokémon* TV program, the collectible cards, the handheld electronic game, *Pokémon* toys at the fast food outlet, *Pokémon* versions of classic board games, *Pokémon* clothing, school supplies, plastic cups, backpacks, *Pokémon* everything and anything. Indeed, the process of extensive branding has become a profoundly normalized part of children's lives. It's now a lack of branding that's out of the ordinary. One of my friends explained to me that her son, a five year old with sophisticated musical tastes, was baffled by the fact that there was no "Talking Heads" stuff—no show, no toys, no logo, no nothing. What was going on, he wondered, with this band he liked so much?

Increasingly the brands kids want aren't just any brands. They crave designer duds and luxury items. By the mid-1990s, parents and buyers reported a sea change as girls aged six to ten became more fashion and label conscious. They wanted trendy styles like platform shoes and black clothing. They started asking for *Hilfiger* and *Donna Karan* labels. The designers claim that "kids are driving the trend," but they have been advertising heavily to them. Meanwhile, children's lines have sprung up at fashion houses such as *Armani* and *Calvin Klein*. *Burberry* opened *Burberry Kids*, and *Abercrombie & Fitch*, the current bad boy of youth apparel, became tweens' favorite brand. Upscaling has gone beyond designer clothes. By the end of the 1990s, Marianne Szymanski, founder of the Toy

Research Institute, reported that "kids are starting to want more expensive toys like computer software, cell phones, VCRs, e-mail, stereos, bedroom microwaves (for making popcorn while they watch movies in their own 'bedroom theater'). And guess what? Parents are buying all these items." Kids are also amassing far more toys than ever before. The number of toys sold annually rose 20 percent between 1995 and 2000. The United States, despite having only 4.5 percent of the world's population, now consumes 45 percent of global toy production.

Consumer experiences are also going luxe, and they're often more adult-like. The London salon MiniKin Kinder offers eight year olds its "Princess Treat," with haircut, manicure, and minifacial. Even cosmetic surgery has begun to reach down into childhood, according to journalist Alissa Quart, who reports that the year between elementary and middle schools is becoming a popular time for aesthetic enhancements for eyes, lips, chins, and ears. For those seeking the ultimate experience, FAO Schwartz offered birthday sleepover parties at a price of \$17,500, and they were booked solid. Restaurateurs report that "crayons just won't do it anymore." Now they're providing menus attached to *Magna Doodle* sets, watercolor paint boxes, and Chinese carryout boxes with chopsticks, fortune cookies, and toys. In perhaps the most dramatic example of restaurant upscaling to come along yet, in 2002 McDonald's gave away *Madame Alexander* dolls, full-sized versions of which go for \$50, with its Happy Meals.

### Real-Life Monopoly

The commercialization of childhood is certainly being driven by the fact that kids have more money and more say, the explanation most marketers articulate. But there's another side to what scholars Shirley and Joe Kincheloe have insightfully called the "Corporate Construction of Childhood." It's the growing scope, market power, and political influence wielded by the small number of megacorporations that sell most of what kids buy. Far from being a consumers' mecca ruled by diverse and rich choices, children's consumer culture is marked by bigness and sameness. Four companies now dominate the children's media and entertainment market almost entirely. There's *Disney*, with its global reach, anodyne cultural products, and long history of racial and sexual stereotyping. Number two is *Viacom*, king of cool, whose *MTV Networks* is the parent company's most profitable division, whose annual revenue in 2001 exceeded \$3 billion. We have *MTV* to thank for shows such as *Beavis and Butthead*,

which has been accused of inspiring copycat antics that led to real-life death and destruction. (Viacom also published this book.) Rupert Murdoch's News Corp is the parent to Fox, which has brought us such contributions to youth culture as *Fear Factor*. And finally, there's AOL Time Warner, owners of WB, Cartoon Network, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and DC Comics. In 2002, the company announced it would begin showing paid sponsorship on its CNN-branded school news broadcast, but backed down after criticism. In the midst of these behemoths, PBS is overmatched, and anyway, it has joined up with Nickelodeon (Viacom) to infiltrate the "educational" market.

In the toy category, it's Mattel and Hasbro, which together have gobbled up virtually all the other toy companies. Playskool, Fisher-Price, Parker Brothers, Milton Bradley, Tonka Trucks, Tyco, Hot Wheels, American Girl, Cabbage Patch Dolls, Tinker Toys, Avalon Hill, Wizards of the Coast, and Mr. Potato Head are all owned by the big two. In early 2002, eight of the top-selling ten toys belonged to these two companies. Video games are dominated by a small number of producers—Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft among them. The big-two model prevails in other markets as well. In candy it's M&M and Hershey. In soft drinks it's Coke and Pepsi. In fast food McDonald's and Burger King. Philip Morris (the tobacco giant, renamed Altria) owns Kraft with its Lunchables product, kids' second favorite lunch choice after pizza, as well as Nabisco and Post cereals. Frito-Lay is part of PepsiCo, as are Tropicana, Gatorade, and Quaker Oats. PepsiCo tries to retain a wholesome oatmeal image with the venerable Quaker on the box, but it's the same company that sells Cap'n Crunch's Choco Donuts cereal. Throughout the world of children's products, the markets are dominated by a few powerful companies.

This matters for a number of reasons. One is that with monopoly comes uniformity. Economic theory predicts that when two opponents face off, the winning strategy for both entails their becoming almost identical. This model explains why gas stations congregate at intersections, why Democrats and Republicans cleave to the political center, and why Coke and Pepsi are hard to tell apart with a blindfold. What it means for consumers is that true variety and diversity of products is hard to find. If you want greasy pizza, sugared drinks, plastic toys, and violent programming for your kids, no problem. It's the other stuff that's missing.

Monopoly also means bigger profits and market power for producers and less value and influence for consumers. That's standard economic reasoning. Finally, many of these companies have spent the past two decades stockpiling money and political influence. At the end of the 1970s, the

Federal Trade Commission was investigating practices in children's advertising and didn't like what it saw. It advocated a ban on advertising sugared products to kids, as well as an end to commercials aimed at children under age eight. Today, such a stance seems almost inconceivable, given the tremendous growth in political influence enjoyed by media corporations and food processors. Philip Morris gave more than \$9 million in soft money to the two political parties between 1995 and 2002 (\$7.8 million of it went to Republicans). AOL Time Warner gave more than \$4 million (nearly equally divided). Disney contributed \$3.6 million. Coca-Cola gave \$2.3 million (mostly to the Republicans). The U.S. Sugar Corporation is also among the top "Double Givers." Two decades of corporate monies have eroded the regulatory, legislative, and judicial environment, making it far harder to protect children.

### Playing Less and Shopping More

Memories shape adult views of childhood. Many in my generation—the baby boomers—have vivid recollections of endless hours of unsupervised, spontaneous play. We remember outdoor activities such as pick-up games on an empty sandlot. Many of us had a "gang" (in the wholesome sense) of neighborhood kids, often of mixed age and sex, who met up after school. When I was a kid, we would get obsessed with particular games, often ones we invented ourselves. There was plenty of traditional indoor play as well, such as house, war, and board games. We made concoctions, played dress-up, built forts, and fought with our siblings. Sometimes we even watched television.

We were lucky. Earlier generations of children spent much of their time working, on farms, in factories, and in domestic service. Paid child labor wasn't eliminated in this country until the 1920s. Baby boomers also escaped the sobering effects of depression and war. And we were a group of girls who were unusually liberated, both because we were allowed out on our own and because we were increasingly excused from household work. Children born in the late 1940s and afterward had more carefree, play-oriented upbringings with less family responsibility than the generations that preceded them. It was a childhood experience that took many decades to achieve, and unfortunately, the era was short-lived. In recent years, children's unsupervised time has declined. They spend more hours in worklike activities. More of daily life is structured by commercial and consumer activities than was true for previous generations.

Table 1  
Weekly Time Children Spend in Various Activities, 1981-1997 (in hours and minutes)

	Ages 3-5		Ages 6-8		Ages 9-12		All Ages	
	1981	1997	1981	1997	1981	1997	1981	1997
Household work	2:09	2:20	2:49	2:07	5:18	3:42	3:46	2:49
Shopping	2:35	3:44	0:59	2:38	1:57	2:24	1:52	2:53
Personal care	6:18	8:32	6:13	7:53	6:21	7:53	6:18	8:05
Eating	9:43	9:24	9:08	8:05	8:13	7:23	8:52	8:13
Sleeping	77:19	76:11	70:04	70:49	65:36	67:24	70:01	71:07
School	14:30	12:05	27:52	32:46	29:02	34:03	24:45	26:48
Studying	0:25	0:36	0:52	2:08	3:22	3:41	1:53	2:16
Visiting	2:58	3:04	3:40	2:48	3:48	2:40	3:32	2:50
Sports	1:31	4:08	6:01	5:13	4:51	6:33	4:15	5:25
Outdoors	0:13	0:37	0:28	0:30	0:46	0:36	0:32	0:35
Art activities	0:28	1:12	0:21	0:45	0:22	0:54	0:23	0:57
Playing	25:50	17:21	14:58	11:10	7:24	8:54	14:30	12:12
Television	15:14	13:52	15:55	12:54	20:01	13:36	17:35	13:29
Reading	0:29	1:24	0:59	1:09	1:03	1:14	0:53	1:16
Household conversations	0:37	0:48	1:07	0:30	0:53	0:27	0:53	0:35
Other passive leisure	2:59	2:35	1:58	1:33	3:24	2:19	2:53	2:11
Day care	0:10	7:30	0:12	1:33	0:18	0:24	0:14	2:57

Source: Hofferth and Sandberg (2001b, Table 2).

## BORN TO BUY

Large-scale studies of children's time use are rare. In 1997, the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics conducted a major survey on children and their environments, and gathered data on how they spend their time. The "Child Development Supplement" was a nationally representative sample with more than 3,500 children from approximately 2,400 households. Time use was measured through a daily activity diary. The data show that time spent in leisure and unstructured play is limited. After subtracting eating, sleeping, personal care, schooling, studying, day care, shopping, and household work, only 25 percent of children's time remains discretionary. For six to twelve year olds, the fraction is a percentage point lower. (See Table 1.)

How do children spend that time? While three to five year olds still play a considerable amount, what study authors Sandra Hofferth and John Sandberg define as play comprises only about ten hours per week for the six-to-twelve age group, lower than school hours (thirty-three), and fewer than the thirteen hours spent watching television as a primary activity. Nine to twelve year olds play fewer than nine hours a week. There are other play-oriented activities during discretionary time, such as art and hobbies, measured at one hour, and "outdoors," at thirty-five minutes.

There is a widespread belief that in comparison with the past, today's children are harried, sped up, herded into productive activities, and less able to be kids. Book titles such as *The Hurried Child* and *The Over-Scheduled Child* reveal these social anxieties. Investigation of time-use patterns two decades ago suggests these worries may not be misplaced. In comparison to 1981, today's children spend more hours in school, and they spend more time on homework. They spend a lot less time visiting others and having household conversations. And their passive leisure time has fallen. They also have somewhat less free time. These trends may help to explain why there are now stress management workshops for kindergartners and why marketing studies report that one of the major problems articulated by kids today is that they want less pressure, less overload, and more time to relax.

Contemporary children also do far more shopping. In 1997, the average child aged six to twelve spent more than two and a half hours a week shopping, a full hour more than in 1981. Children are frequent visitors to the grocery store and the pharmacy. They run errands to the dry cleaners and accompany parents to the mall. They spent as much time shopping as visiting, twice as much time shopping as reading or going to church, and five times as much as playing outdoors. They spent half as much time shopping as playing sports. More children go shopping each week (52 per-

**Table 2**  
**Average Daily Time Exposed to Each Medium**  
(in hours and minutes)

	<b>Ages 2-7</b>	<b>Ages 8-13</b>
Total media exposure	4:17	8:08
Television	1:59	3:37
Taped TV shows	0:03	0:20
Videotapes (commercial)	0:26	0:29
Movies	0:02	0:26
Video games	0:08	0:32
Print media	0:45	0:50
Radio	0:24	0:35
CDs and tapes	0:21	0:47
Computer	0:07	0:32

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation (1999, Table 8-A).

**Table 3**  
**Amount of Daily Media Exposure and Media Use**  
(in hours and minutes)

	<b>Total exposure</b>	<b>Person hours</b>
All ages	6:32	5:29
Ages 2-7	4:17	3:34
Ages 8-13	8:08	6:47

Note: Total exposure is the sum of the amount of time children spend with each type of media, which includes double-counting. Person hours adjusts exposure time to avoid double-counting and represents total daily time spent with media.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation (1999, Table 7).

cent) than read (42 percent), go to church (26 percent), participate in youth groups (25 percent), play outdoors (17 percent), or spend time in household conversation (32 percent).

### Postmodern Childhood: The Electronic Generation

The change that has attracted most attention is kids' heavy involvement with electronic media, prompting some to posit a new, postmodern childhood, driven by television, Internet, video games, movies, and videos. To see the magnitude of these changes, we need to move beyond the diary data, which focus mainly on television, to more detailed surveys of media use.

One such study is the Kaiser Family Foundation's 1999 *Kids & Media in the Millennium*, a high-quality, large-scale survey that combined a time diary with questions about yesterday's media viewing. It found that daily television viewing for two to eighteen year olds was two hours and forty-six minutes, plus an additional twenty-eight minutes watching videotapes. Viewing is most intense at ages eight to thirteen, when television takes up three hours and thirty-seven minutes a day, plus an additional twenty-nine minutes with videotapes. That's nearly thirty hours per week. The averages conceal wide variations, because there is a substantial group of very heavy watchers: 27.5 percent of kids aged eight to thirteen report more than five hours a day of TV viewing.

These estimates accord with most surveys of media use, including Nielsen's, but are much higher than traditional time diaries, which yield average viewing times of only thirteen to fourteen hours per week. One reason for the difference is that the diaries focus on primary activities, and television is often watched while doing other things. For example, in the Kaiser study, 42 percent of respondents reported that in their house, the television was on "most of the time." In 60 percent of households the television is on during meals.

When we combine all types of media—video games, computers, music, radio, and print—media time almost doubles. The average American child is estimated to spend five hours and twenty-nine minutes a day with media, for a weekly total of more than thirty-eight hours. About forty-five minutes a day is spent with print media. Forty-six percent of eight to thirteen year olds report total media exposure (which double counts media being used simultaneously) of more than seven hours per day. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Television viewing varies significantly by race, income, and parental education, with the racial variations being most pronounced. For example, among eight to eighteen year olds, white children watch an average of two hours and forty-seven minutes a day, Hispanic children watch three hours and fifty minutes, and black children watch four hours and forty-one minutes of television a day. All three groups also watch an additional thirty minutes of video. In households with lower incomes, there is more television watching, especially among younger children. And in households where parents have lower educational levels, viewing times are higher, especially among younger children.

### How Children Are Faring

The conservative take on the trends I've described is that we've produced a generation of couch potato kids, scarfing down chips and soda, driving their parents crazy about those hundred-dollar sneakers. They're spoiled, unable to delay gratification, and headed for trouble. An alternate view stresses the enormous accomplishments of young people today, their volunteer spirit, resiliency, and tolerance. Setting aside these value judgments, what do we know about how children are doing? The past fifteen to twenty years have witnessed big changes in what kids have been eating, drinking, watching, and doing. How are they faring?

Let's start with child nutrition. Historically, poverty has been the major culprit in malnutrition and poor diet. And despite the nation's wealth, we have significant levels of poverty-induced hunger and malnutrition. In 1999, 16.9 percent of children were subject to what is called "food insecurity" and did not have adequate food to live active, healthy lives. Millions of American children still go hungry. But now there's a new problem with food. Diets have gotten far out of line with recommended nutritional standards. Most kids are eating the wrong foods, and too many of them. A 1997 study found that 50 percent of children's calories are from added fat and sugar, and the diets of 45 percent of children failed to meet any of the standards of the USDA's food pyramid. Children eat excessive quantities of advertised food products and not enough fruits, vegetables, and fiber. Among children aged six to twelve, only 12 percent have a healthy diet, and 13 percent eat a poor diet. The rest are in the "needs improvement" category.

As has been widely reported, rates of youth obesity are skyrocketing. Using the eighty-fifth percentile Body Mass Index as a cutoff, about 25

percent of American youth are now overweight or obese. By the stiffer ninety-fifth percentile criterion, 15 percent of children are obese. Since 1980, obesity rates for children have doubled, and those for teens have tripled. Weight-related diseases, such as type II diabetes and hypertension, are rising rapidly. Alongside the rise in obesity is excessive concern with thinness and body image and a host of eating disorders. Record numbers of girls are on diets, and they are beginning to diet at an increasingly young age.

Other forms of consumption are similarly troubling. Kids are smoking, drinking alcohol, and taking illegal drugs at alarming rates. As early as the eighth grade, more than 7 percent of kids are regular smokers, and that number nearly triples by twelfth grade. Despite the tobacco settlement, more than 2,000 children and teens still start smoking every day, a third of whom will die of smoking-related causes. In the eighth grade, 14 percent of kids report that they have taken five alcoholic drinks in a row within the past two weeks. By the twelfth grade, twice as many answer affirmatively. Half of all high schoolers report that they currently drink alcohol. And 12 percent of eighth graders report that they have used illegal drugs within the past thirty days. Among twelfth graders, that percentage rises to 25 percent.

Children and youth are increasingly suffering from emotional and mental health problems. A study published in the *Pediatrics Journal* found that rates of emotional and behavioral problems among children aged four to fifteen soared between 1979 and 1996. Rates of anxiety and depression went from negligible to 3.6 percent; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder rose from 1.4 percent to 9.2 percent. Estimates of major depression are as high as 8 percent for adolescents. In recent decades, suicide rates have climbed, and suicide is now the fourth leading cause of death among ten to fourteen year olds. Suicide rates are highest among racial minorities. In 2001, the annual survey of incoming college freshmen by the University of California at Los Angeles found that self-reports of physical and emotional health reached their worst level in the sixteen years the questions had been asked.

The large-scale MECA study (Methods for the Epidemiology of Child and Adolescent Mental Disorders) yields similar findings. It found that 13 percent of kids aged nine to seventeen suffer from anxiety, 6.2 percent have mood disorders, 10.3 percent have disruptive disorders, and 2 percent suffer from substance abuse. Taken together, about 21 percent of this age group had a "diagnosable mental or addictive disorder with at least minimum impairment." Eleven percent had a significant functional impairment.

ment, and 5 percent were reported to have an extreme functional impairment. (See Table 4.)

Conclusions from the 1997 Child Development Supplement, which included children aged three to twelve, are also cause for concern. Although parents reported that their children were generally happy and healthy, one in five said that they were fearful or anxious, unhappy, sad, depressed, or withdrawn. Two in five reported that their children were impulsive, disobedient, or moody. All told, nearly 50 percent had at least one of these problems. This survey also asked about the quality of relationships between children and parents. It found that only 59 percent of parents reported that their relationships with their school-aged children are "extremely or very close," and only 57 percent reported engaging in very warm behaviors with their child several times a week. (Warm behaviors are defined as hugging, joking, playing, and telling them they love them.)

Taken together, these findings are not comforting. They show that American children are worse off today than they were ten or twenty years ago. This conclusion is especially notable when we consider that during the past fifteen years, child poverty fell substantially, from a high of 22 percent in the late 1980s to its current rate of 16 percent. The decline in child poverty should have led to improvements in measures of distress, because child poverty is correlated with adverse physical and psychological health outcomes. The deterioration of the well-being indicators suggests that some powerful negative factors are undermining children's well-being.

**Table 4**  
**Youth Mental and Addictive Disorders**  
**Children and Adolescents Age 9–17**

Percentage of Youth, Ages 9–17	
Anxiety disorders	13.0
Mood disorders	6.2
Disruptive disorders	10.3
Substance use disorders	2.0
Any disorder	20.9

Source: Data cited in U.S. Office of the Surgeon General (1999, Table 3-1).

One of them may be the upsurge in materialist values. Children's top aspiration now is to be rich, a more appealing prospect to them than being a great athlete, or a celebrity, or being really smart, the goals of earlier eras. Forty-four percent of kids in fourth through eighth grades now report that they daydream "a lot" about being rich. And nearly two-thirds of parents report that "my child defines his or her self-worth in terms of the things they own and wear more than I did when I was that age."

Psychologists have found that espousing these kinds of materialist values undermines well-being, leading people to be more depressed, anxious, less vital, and in worse physical health. Among youth, those who are more materialistic are more likely to engage in risky behaviors. In the light of these findings, the survey data are worrisome. One of the few large national surveys of children's materialism found that more than a third of all children aged nine to fourteen would rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else, more than a third "really like kids that have very special games or clothes," more than half agree that "when you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you are," and 62 percent say that "the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money." To understand how and why American children got this way, it's time to take a stroll down Madison Avenue.

Craig Anderson found that as the scientific evidence of the effects of media violence on aggression has mounted over the past twenty-five years, media accounts have steadily grown more skeptical and increasingly likely to discount the scientific research. This contributes to a climate of denial and complacency.

Violence is only one of the documented impacts of television and other electronic media. There are other reasons to be wary of contemporary media. A large number of studies have uncovered negative effects, such as the association between television viewing and lower cognitive skills, reading competency, brain development, and academic achievement. A growing literature explores the link between viewing and obesity, as well as documents increases in eating disorders after the introduction of television. The American Pediatrics Association recommends that children under the age of two not watch television at all and that all patients be given a "media history," because of the significant effect that heavy viewing has on well-being. (Because this research has been written about so extensively, I will not reproduce the arguments here, and refer the reader to the sources given in the endnotes.) I will just note that my own statistical findings lend further support to this literature by connecting viewing with declines in psychological well-being.

The marketing of addictive products, the promotion of unhealthy eating habits, and cultivating a taste for violence are especially abhorrent practices when children are the targets. Addictions often begin during youth, and some researchers suspect that changes in brain chemistry occur that make early dependency very difficult to break. Eating habits learned in childhood frequently continue throughout adulthood. That's part of why Happy Meals and Lunchables are not harmless. Another worrisome trend is that the gambling industry has turned its attention toward kids, remaking its hotels into kid-friendly places and producing slot machines with children's themes, such as Monopoly. Some of the machines have been denied licenses, but reports are that the industry has been busy locking up licensing agreements with kid icons. Like drugs, gambling is becoming pervasive, and the boundaries between kids and adults are likely to come under increasing strain.

Manufacturers and marketers of all these products understand the importance of establishing early demand. There's even an industry term for it—the *future market*—and it's about turning kids into lifelong customers.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# How Consumer Culture Undermines Children's Well-Being

On a wintry morning in February 2002, I rang the bell at the modest house of Pat Dunn and her husband, George. Pat answered the door in her dressing gown, evidently surprised to see me. I was there to talk about her stepson Greg, a sixth grader at one of the six elementary schools in Doxley, a pseudonym for a Boston suburb. Greg had participated in a survey I was conducting in the Doxley schools, and I wanted to interview Pat about how she navigated Greg's relationship to consumer culture. She was willing to proceed if I didn't mind the mess or her attire. Our conversation was one of the most interesting I had.

Greg is an avid consumer. He loves professional wrestling, Gameboy, Nintendo, television, movies, junk food, and CDs (especially those with parental advisories). Since he came to live with Pat and George, they've had a succession of incidents, most of which resulted in Greg's losing privileges to one or another of these things. He isn't allowed to do wrestling moves on his younger sister, but he does, and he loses the right to watch wrestling. He's supposed to do his homework, but he has lied and said he doesn't have any so he can spend his time playing a new Gameboy. He's supposed to tell the truth but he stole Pat's Snickers bar and denied it. He knows he's not allowed to have CDs with parental advisories, but he went behind Pat and George's back and asked his mother to buy them for him. So they were confiscated.

Pat described what seemed like endless conflicts about consumer culture. As the conversation wore on, I also learned about Greg's problems. He's overweight, so they're trying to reduce his consumption of fast food and processed items. He had a tendency to fly into rages and has been diagnosed as bipolar, but now he's on medication and is doing better. He's keeping up in school, but only by diligent attention and spending more

time than most of the other kids. Lying to the teacher and his parents about homework he'd rather not do hasn't helped.

Pat was one of twenty-five mothers and three fathers I interviewed in Doxley. Greg was the most extreme case of a problem kid heavily immersed in consumer culture. But I heard similar stories from other families. One boy was "drawn like a moth" to television and had to be strictly regulated in the amount of time he spent with electronic media. One mother talked about how her generally obedient son would lie to her when he wasn't following the rules about media or the Internet, rules she'd instituted after she was shocked to find her older son involved in conversations about sex and drugs through instant messaging. One couple described their son Doug as the "ultimate consumer." He wanted to buy every product he saw advertised on television. Doug was now in sixth grade, and they were fighting constant battles. He would stay on the computer all day if they let him. He has a weakness for fast food. He has a lot of trouble holding on to money. His mother even described trying to sneak out to the store without him to avoid conflicts about buying stuff. As the conversation progressed, I discovered that Doug is overweight and finds physical activity difficult. He has had a tendency to be distracted and hasn't always done well in school. I interviewed one mother whose son I recognized because he had trouble filling out the survey on his own and I had to help him. As she described his social and academic problems, I remembered that he had checked the top category for weekly television viewing—more than thirty hours. Another mother described a younger daughter who went through a stage where she didn't want to go to school; she wanted to watch TV and eat all the time. She went on antidepressant medication at age three and was doing better, but she still gravitates to the TV.

A majority of the parents I interviewed were not grappling with such serious problems, but many of those parents described restrictive regimes in which media usage and content were strictly monitored and regulated, use of the Internet was limited or forbidden, and fast food was a special treat. Some of these mothers watched their children's engagement with consumer culture like hawks, carefully scrutinizing every suggestion at the video store, conferring with other mothers about sleepovers and movies. Others maintained strict controls over allowances and spending money, mandating set-asides for charity and the savings account, and forbidding some purchases even when children saved up their own money. The most restrictive mothers generally described their children as healthy, well-functioning, academically and socially successful, and not all that resistant to the rules and prohibitions.

In the weeks and months after the interviews, my thoughts reverted frequently to the conversations about the problem kids, who were mostly boys. The case of Greg stood out. But each time I thought about him, I also dismissed his experience because he had medically diagnosed problems. His passions for consumer culture were a symptom, not a cause, I reasoned. I was determined not to fall into the trap of falsely laying blame on those influences. When I wrote the first draft of my book, I ignored Greg, Doug, and similar children on grounds that they were atypical.

But my survey results suggested otherwise. They implied that the link between the children's problems and their heavy involvement in consumer culture wasn't symptomatic. Involvement in consumer culture leads to problems. I reached these conclusions on the basis of a sophisticated statistical model that allows differentiation between mere correlation, or association, and underlying causes. Furthermore, the model also found that there is no relation in reverse—kids with psychological problems are no more likely to be attracted to consumer culture than are other children. The conclusion of these results is that we shouldn't discount Greg, Doug, and the other troubled kids. They are classic examples of the kinds of damage that heavy consumer involvement can lead to. Conversely, the stories of well-adjusted kids are testimony to the diligent efforts of their parents, who carefully ration their exposure to the culture.

In the preceding chapters, I have referred to many studies and whole literatures—investigations of the impact of television, studies of whether food marketing affects caloric intake and obesity, and research that documents how smoking in movies leads young kids to smoke, among others. Altogether these findings provide a wealth of information about how consumer culture affects children. But virtually all the existing research looks at particular aspects and products of consumer culture rather than commercialization as a general phenomenon. And most of it focuses on electronic media. I felt that new work was needed to create a better understanding of the whole picture. I wanted to link media use, advertising, and children's involvement in the larger consumer marketplace and then test to see whether that involvement has palpable effects on well-being. To my knowledge, this is the first study of its kind. Its results are not encouraging.

### The Survey on Children, Media, and Consumer Culture: Setting the Scene

The Survey on Children, Media, and Consumer Culture has now been taken by 300 children between the ages of ten and thirteen, in and around Boston, Massachusetts. These children come from varied socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, and span the spectrum from avid spenders and TV watchers to kids who are mostly isolated from commercial culture. Three hundred may sound like a small number in comparison to national polls, which typically start at a thousand, but within the psychological literatures that are most closely related to this study, 300 children is actually a large sample size. Most important, it's far bigger than is needed to establish statistical reliability and confidence in the findings.

The children who participated in the survey were nearly all fifth and sixth graders. I chose this age group because they form the core of the tween market and are a key target for marketers. In contrast to younger children, fifth and sixth graders tend to be significantly involved in consumer culture and have developed some independence in terms of tastes and consumer choices. In the interviews, parents frequently described newfound interests in clothes, labels, and popular music. This age group has also been identified in classic developmental psychology models as distinct. They are thought to have moved beyond the purely self-centered acquisition stage of "I want this" and "Give me that," which characterizes younger children. Fifth and sixth graders are capable of taking written surveys and providing more accurate information than younger children. This age was also appealing because the academic literature on their relationship to consumer culture is very limited. In contrast, teens have been studied more intensively. Because teens and children are so different, I decided not to add the older age group.

The questionnaire consists of 157 questions and covers five major topic areas: media use, consumer values and involvement in consumer culture, relationships with parents, demographic variables, and measures of physical and mental well-being. The measures of well-being were mainly previously established scales, or what psychologists call screens, for depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. The survey was administered in two phases and two locales—one suburban, the other urban. The first phase took place during the fall and winter of 2001–2002, with 210 children in three schools in the suburban town of Doxley, located about thirty minutes outside Boston. It's an old town with a rural feel, but throughout the area,

upscale subdivisions are springing up, filled with large brick colonials. Like other Boston suburbs, Doxley has experienced a housing boom over the past ten years, fueled by an influx of professionals seeking proximity to the high-tech companies that ring Interstate 495. Household income in the town is very high, at \$90,000, compared to a statewide median of \$50,502, and a similar nationwide level. Housing prices are high as well. In 2002 the median house cost more than \$350,000, almost twice the price a decade earlier. Doxley boasts excellent public schools but without the prestige premium exacted in some of the neighboring towns.

The second phase of the survey occurred just about a year later (2002–2003) in two Boston schools and included ninety-three children. These are not neighborhood schools but special schools that serve children throughout the city, the bulk of whom are African Americans or Latino/as. Many are also low income. One is a charter school, the other a pilot school whose stated academic focus is science and math. (At the charter school, the children who participated were those with higher math achievement.) The children live mainly in the neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan, Roxbury, and Boston proper. These locales provide a sharp contrast to Doxley and have far more low-income residents and less home ownership. One characteristic shared by both sites is that the parents are highly educated and place a high value on education for their children. None of the schools, in either Doxley or Boston, was paid to participate, but did so because the school officials believed that the research was asking important questions.

Table 5 presents background information on the children. The sample was somewhat more male, at 53 percent boys and 47 percent girls. Racially, the makeup is 57 percent white, 16 percent African American, 3 percent Latino/a, 10 percent Asian American, and 6 percent multiracial. In addition, 8 percent of the children identified with the "other" racial category. Twelve percent had moved to the United States in the past two years. Between the two sites, the racial composition of the children varies significantly. In the suburban site, 79 percent are white, compared to only 10 percent of the Boston sample. As expected, there are other differences between the two samples. In Doxley, 83 percent of the children reported that their parents were married, and only 12 percent reported that their parents were divorced. By contrast, in Boston, 47 percent of the parents were currently married, and 19 percent were divorced. Only 60.5 percent of the Boston children reported that they live with their fathers, in comparison to 90 percent in Doxley. And although parental college graduation rates are very high for both samples, they are near universal in Doxley, where over 85 percent

**Table 5**  
**Describing the Sample (percentages of respondents)**

Characteristic	All Respondents	Doxley Respondents	Boston Respondents
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	52.8	53.7	57.1
Female	47.2	46.3	48.9
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White	56.8	78.7	9.6
African American	15.9	1.0	47.9
Latino/a	3.4	0.5	9.6
Asian American	9.8	12.9	3.2
Multiracial	6.4	2.5	14.9
Other	7.8	4.5	14.9
<b>Educational attainment</b>			
Mother graduated college	79.5	89.6	57.1
Father graduated college	76.9	85.0	58.1
<b>Parents' marital status</b>			
Married	72.2	83.4	46.7
Divorced	13.9	11.7	18.9
Single	8.1	2.0	22.2
Widower	2.7	2.9	2.2
<b>Does mother hold a job?</b>			
Yes	76.3	69.5	91.3
No	23.7	30.5	8.7
<b>Mother full- or part-time job?</b>			
Full-time	59.6	46.8	80.0
Part-time	40.4	53.2	20.0
<b>Does father hold a job?</b>			
Yes	94.7	96.0	91.6
No	5.3	4.0	8.4

of the children reported that their mothers and fathers had graduated from college, compared to about 57 percent of the Boston children. Many of the parents also hold postgraduate degrees, but during the survey administration, the children displayed high rates of uncertainty about their parents' educational credentials beyond college, and almost half reported "don't know." These responses were nearly the same in the two groups. The survey also included questions about parents' work status. In Doxley, 70 percent of the mothers are employed, but fewer than half (47 percent) work full time. In Boston, 91 percent hold jobs, and 80 percent of those are full time. Overall, 95 percent of the fathers are employed. Twenty-two percent of the children agree that their mother "works really long hours," and 45 percent said the same about their fathers. The survey did not ask about financial status because children are unlikely to know much about their parents' income, wealth holdings, or debts. Instead, following a common research practice, we used parental education to stand in for socioeconomic class. (Because I collaborated with others on the data analysis, I use the pronoun *we* to discuss the statistical results.)

While the inclusion of two very different locales yields a varied group of children, it is important to recognize that in neither Boston nor Doxley did we have a true random sample. School-based surveys reproduce the particularities of the population of children who attend them. For all the participating schools, there is a bias toward parents who place a high value on education. And while the sample includes a wide socioeconomic range, there are more children on the high and low ends of the spectrum than exist in the population. However, this does not present a problem for the kind of study I have conducted, whose purpose is to identify relationships among and between variables, for example, between consumer involvement and depression. That's because if there is a true relationship between those two variables, it should be valid through the whole population, including both the segments of the population I have surveyed and those I haven't. Therefore, conducting the analysis at a particular subset of schools does not introduce worrisome biases. The fact that the results were replicated in two very different types of environments also gives confidence in their wider applicability. Of course, the more groups one can replicate findings with, the more confidence one has. But the fact that the children do not form a nationally representative sample does not undermine my findings. However, it does mean that what we call descriptive data, such as the average number of hours the children spend with media, the average score on the psychological outcome variables, and the average level of consumer involvement, cannot be assumed to match

any national or even Boston average. Those are the kinds of descriptive pieces of information for which a truly representative sample is necessary.

### Consumer Involvement Among the Children

Consumer culture is a sprawling entity that is hard to define and measure. This study attempted to quantify something we called "consumer involvement." But there's no single piece of information that summarizes how involved a child is in consumer culture, and every measure has drawbacks and ambiguities. Having a lot of possessions could indicate that a kid is highly materialistic and focused on things, or it might just mean that he is wealthy. One child may care desperately about the label on her jeans, but be content with owning only one or two pairs, while another accumulates many cheaper outfits. Who is more "consumerist"? Agreeing on a survey that you feel deprived means something very different at the top and bottom of the income scale.

Because it's impossible to find one or even two summary measures that can accurately capture what we were interested in, we started with a broad range of consumer attitudes, values, and activities. The children were asked to respond to eighteen statements, or what psychologists call "items," such as "I like to watch commercials," "Brand names matter to me," and "When I go somewhere special, I usually like to buy something." The items and the children's responses are contained in Table 6.

The children display a wide range of consumer involvement, both among and between the two sites, and also among the eighteen items. The average answer is right in the middle, between the consumerist and non-consumerist range of the scale. However, this average masks wide variation. On some items, most of the children report a strong consumerist orientation. Eighty-eight percent agree or strongly agree that "I usually have something in mind that I want to buy or get," 85 percent say that they "care a lot about my games, toys, and other possessions," 76 percent say that they "like shopping and going to stores," and nearly all of them (92 percent) say that they "want to make a lot of money when I grow up." On other issues, the answers were split more evenly. Fifty-two percent agree and strongly agree that they like clothes with popular labels, 40 percent say that brand names matter to them, 42 percent say that "being cool is important to me," 47 percent wish their parents gave them more money, and 44 percent agree that they don't care too much about what they wear. Finally, some statements evoke low levels of consumerism. Only 35

**Table 6**  
**Consumer Involvement Scale: All Respondents**  
**(All data are in percentages of respondents.)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel like other kids have more stuff than I do.	4.1	28.6	44.6	22.8
I wish my family could afford to buy me more of what I want.	13.4	20.0	33.8	32.8
I have pretty much everything I need in terms of possessions.	28.6	49.5	17.5	4.4
I wish my parents gave me more money to spend.	21.3	26.0	40.9	11.8
When I decide who to be friends with, I don't care what toys or stuff the person has.	63.7	29.0	5.0	2.0
I usually have something in mind that I want to buy or get.	43.1	45.1	9.8	2.0
I want to make a lot of money when I grow up.	63.3	29.3	5.4	2.0
I care a lot about my games, toys, and other possessions.	40.1	44.8	12.8	2.4
When I go somewhere special, I usually like to buy something.	36.5	51.4	10.0	2.0
I don't care too much about what I wear.	9.1	35.2	29.5	26.2
Brand names matter to me.	13.0	27.3	33.1	26.6
I like clothes with popular labels.	20.0	32.2	32.2	15.6
Being cool is important to me.	12.9	28.9	39.5	18.7
It doesn't matter to me what kind of car my family has.	29.6	41.2	18.2	11.0
I like shopping and going to stores.	39.9	36.5	14.9	8.8
I wish my parents earned more money.	13.4	21.9	32.9	31.8
I like collecting things.	28.7	43.2	22.3	5.7
I like watching commercials.	8.4	16.2	28.3	47.1

**Table 6a**  
**Consumer Involvement Scale: Doxley Respondents**  
 (All data are in percentages of respondents.)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel other kids have more stuff than I do.	3.5	35.6	45.0	15.8
I wish my family could afford to buy me more of what I want.	10.1	22.1	37.2	30.7
I have pretty much everything I need in terms of possessions.	28.1	50.7	17.2	3.9
I wish my parents gave me more money to spend.	17.8	23.3	47.5	11.4
When I decide who to be friends with, I don't care what toys or stuff the person has.	66.0	29.6	2.9	1.5
I usually have something in mind that I want to buy or get.	37.9	47.3	12.3	2.5
I want to make a lot of money when I grow up.	55.7	35.0	7.9	1.5
I care a lot about my games, toys, and other possessions.	34.5	50.7	13.3	1.5
When I go somewhere special, I usually like to buy something.	29.8	57.6	10.7	2.0
I don't care too much about what I wear.	9.3	37.7	32.8	20.1
Brand names matter to me.	7.9	27.2	35.6	29.2
I like clothes with popular labels.	10.0	33.3	38.8	17.9
Being cool is important to me.	9.5	31.5	41.0	18.0
It doesn't matter to me what kind of car my family has.	31.7	45.5	14.9	7.9
I like shopping and going to stores.	34.7	38.1	17.8	9.4
I wish my parents earned more money.	7.9	23.7	34.7	33.7
I like collecting things.	29.6	43.8	23.2	3.4
I like watching commercials.	7.9	15.8	31.0	45.3

**Table 6b**  
**Consumer Involvement Scale: Boston Respondents**  
 (All data are in percentages of respondents.)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel like other kids have more stuff than I do.	5.4	13.0	43.5	38.0
I wish my family could afford to buy me more of what I want.	20.9	15.4	26.4	37.4
I have pretty much everything I need in terms of possessions.	29.8	46.8	18.1	5.3
I wish my parents gave me more money to spend.	28.7	31.9	26.6	12.8
When I decide who to be friends with, I don't care what toys or stuff the person has.	58.5	27.7	9.6	4.3
I usually have something in mind that I want to buy or get.	54.3	40.4	4.3	1.1
I want to make a lot of money when I grow up.	79.8	17.0	0	3.2
I care a lot about my games, toys, and other possessions.	52.1	31.9	11.7	4.3
When I go somewhere special, I usually like to buy something.	51.1	38.3	8.5	2.1
I don't care too much about what I wear.	8.5	29.8	22.3	39.4
Brand names matter to me.	24.2	27.5	27.5	20.9
I like clothes with popular labels.	41.5	29.8	18.1	10.6
Being cool is important to me.	20.2	23.4	36.2	20.2
It doesn't matter to me what kind of car my family has.	24.7	31.5	25.8	18.0
I like shopping and going to stores.	51.1	33.0	8.5	7.4
I wish my parents earned more money.	24.7	18.3	29.0	28.0
I like collecting things.	26.9	41.9	20.4	10.8
I like watching commercials.	9.6	17.0	22.3	51.1

percent say that they wish their parents earned more money, 33 percent say they feel other kids have more stuff, 25 percent like to watch commercials, and 71 percent say that the kind of car their family has doesn't matter to them.

Overall, the Boston children displayed a higher average level of consumer involvement than those from Doxley. The Boston children were more likely to enjoy shopping; more of them care a lot about their possessions; they were more likely to care about brand names and having clothes with popular labels; they say being cool is important to them; and they were more likely to have something in mind that they want to buy or get. They are more likely to wish their parents earned more, and far more of them (80 percent versus 56 percent) strongly agreed that they want to make a lot of money when they grow up. However, there are some items where the differences were reversed. Although the Boston children come from less well-off families, they are less likely to feel that other kids have more stuff than they do and just about as likely to report that they have everything they need as the suburban sample. They are also slightly less likely to care about what they wear, or to like collecting.

Having collected these data, our next task was to figure out whether these eighteen items together comprise a reasonable measure of consumer involvement. Answering that question involves conducting what is called a factor analysis—a statistical technique that tests whether the items fit together in a systematic way. Factor analysis analyzes the relationships among all the items and assesses how closely answers to one item correlate with answers to the others. Do children who like to shop also care about designer labels? If a child wishes her parents earned more money, does she also want to earn a lot when she grows up? If the answers are similar across the items, then we can group them together into a common factor. This means that we are justified in believing that the different statements are measuring one psychological or social construct.

The factor analysis revealed high levels of common answers among the items. Sixteen of the eighteen grouped together into one single factor measuring consumer involvement. (The two items that were dropped were "I like collecting things" and "I like watching commercials.") There was also evidence that some of the items were more closely related to each other than others, which means that they form what are called subfactors. The three that we identified loosely measure "dissatisfaction," "consumer orientation," and "brand awareness." The items are ordered in Table 6 to replicate these scales. Items 1-5 represent dissatisfaction, items 6-9 are consumer orientation, and items 10-14 are brand awareness. The remain-

ing two items, numbers 15 and 16, are not closely connected with any of the subscales. In addition, because we suspected that some of the questions might have significant differences by gender (for example, that girls care more about clothes or popular labels, and boys are more likely to be collectors), we did all of the confirmatory factor analysis separately for boys and girls. To our surprise, we found only minor differences by sex and therefore combined the boys and girls in subsequent analysis.

### Patterns of Media Use

The survey included a series of questions about television, video games, computer, movies, and magazines. As expected, the children of Doxley and Boston are involved with a variety of media. We found that almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the children watch television every day, and the median estimate of weekly television viewing time is six to ten hours per week (see Table 7). This is far lower than national estimates of twenty-five hours, but that's not surprising given the strong academic orientation of most of the children in the survey. We also found major differences between the two sites, with the striking finding being the low levels of time Doxley kids spend watching television. In interviews, Doxley parents explained that their children's television time was curtailed by the heavy demands of homework and extracurricular activities, as well as by their own restrictions. Only 17 percent of Doxley children report watching more than fifteen hours of television a week, compared to 39 percent of Boston children. And only about a tenth of Doxley children report watching more than twenty hours a week, compared to a third of Boston children. Fifty-six percent of Doxley kids watch TV every day versus 78 percent of the Boston children. (Table 7 also shows data on the frequency of watching at particular times of day.) We asked only one or two questions about what children were watching and found that 19 percent in Doxley and 57 percent in Boston watch MTV or VH1 regularly, and quite a few watch every day. We also found that 45 percent of the children report watching R-rated movies, including a substantial number who watch them fairly or very often.

Table 8 presents data on other types of media use. Here the differences between the samples were less consistent. Doxley kids spend more time playing on the computer, while Bostonians are more avid moviegoers, watch more videos, buy more CDs, and spend more time watching video games. Magazine reading is roughly the same.

Table 7  
Television Viewing: All Respondents

Number of hours spent per week watching television	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	30 +
Never	2.7%	12.1%	25.0%	20.1%	16.1%	6.7%	8.1%	9.1%
1-2 Times per Month								
Watch television after school	14.6	13.2	13.5	24.0	34.7			
Watch television before school	34.9	13.2	10.5	15.3	26.1			
Watch television during dinner	46.5	20.8	7.4	11.3	14.1			
Watch television after dinner	12.0	15.8	13.4	27.8	31.0			
Rarely/Never								
How often do you watch MTV/VH1?	57.1	11.8	18.9	12.2				
Yes								
Watch television every day	63.0	37.0						
Never								

Table 7a  
Television Viewing: Doxley

Number of hours spent per week watching television	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	30 +
Never	2.9%	12.3%	28.9%	24.0%	15.2%	7.4%	6.4%	2.9%
1-2 Times per Month								
Watch television after school	16.2	17.3	17.8	26.4	22.3			
Watch television before school	37.8	13.9	12.4	16.4	19.4			
Watch television during dinner	50.0	27.3	6.7	9.3	6.7			
Watch television after dinner	11.2	19.4	17.9	29.1	22.4			
Rarely/Never								
How often do you watch MTV/VH1	63.9	17.3	10.9	7.9				
Yes								
Watch television every day	56.0	44.0						
Never								

Table 7b  
Television Viewing: Boston

Table 8  
Other Media Use: All Respondents

Number of hours spent per week	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	30+
Watching videos	13.0%	35.7%	32.0%	11.7%	3.0%	1.7%	1.7%	1.3%
Playing on the computer	14.3	39.5	22.1	11.6	5.4	1.7	3.4	2.0
Playing video games	23.8	26.5	19.8	10.4	7.0	5.4	2.3	4.7
	<b>0</b>	<b>1-2</b>	<b>3-5</b>	<b>6-10</b>	<b>10+</b>			
Magazines read regularly	29.3	48.3	18.7	2.3	1.3			
Movies watched per month	5.1	32.0	35.4	16.5	11.1			
	<b>Rarely/Never</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>				<b>1-2 Times</b>	<b>per Week</b>	<b>Every Day</b>
Watch R-rated movies	55.6	27.9				10.1		6.4

Table 8a  
Other Media Use: Doxley Respondents

Number of hours spent per week	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	30+
Watching videos	14.1%	42.2%	30.6%	9.2%	1.9%	1.0%	.5%	.5%
Playing on the computer	14.4	37.6	21.3	13.4	5.9	2.0	4.0	1.5
Playing video games	25.5	28.9	18.6	9.8	7.4	5.9	2.5	1.5
	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	10+			
Magazines read regularly	28.2	50.0	19.4	1.5	1.0			
Movies watched per month	3.4	35.0	39.9	15.3	6.4			
	Rarely/Never	Occasionally		1-2 Times per Week	Every Day			
Watch R-rated movies	66.2	23.5		7.4	2.9			

**Table 8b**  
**Other Media Use: Boston Respondents**

Number of hours spent per week	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	30+
Watching videos	10.6%	21.3%	35.1%	17.0%	5.3%	3.2%	4.3%	3.2%
Playing on the computer	14.1	43.5	23.9	7.6	4.3	1.1	2.2	3.3
Playing video games	20.2	21.3	22.3	11.7	6.4	4.3	2.1	11.7
Magazines read regularly	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	10+			
Movies watched per month	31.9	44.7	17.0	4.3	2.1			
Watch R-rated movies	8.5	25.5	25.5	19.1	21.3			
	Rarely/Never	Occasionally				1-2 Times per Week	Every Day	
	32.3	37.6				16.1	14.0	

### Assessing the Children's Well-Being

The central question to which the study was addressed is how the children's involvement in consumer culture affects their well-being. We collected four measures to assess how they are doing: depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and psychosomatic symptoms. For the first three, we used scales with well-established track records in the psychological literature. The psychosomatic symptom questions are original to this survey. In all four cases, we conducted factor analysis to ensure that the measures held together as single constructs, and they did. Throughout, we relied on the children's own answers about their feelings rather than assessments from adults.

Tables 9 and 10 show that most of the children report being happy and well adjusted, and the scores for well-being are within normal levels. Consider the case of depression (Table 10). The students were asked to respond to seventeen items, which asked about how often they are sad and how often things bother them. The range of possible scores is from 17 (least depressed) to 51 (most depressed). Our average was 21.7, indicating a low average level of depression. Boston students scored 1.3 points higher than their counterparts in Doxley. Findings for anxiety, which tends to be correlated with depression, were similar, although this variable is scored in reverse, so that higher scores indicate less anxiety. We also asked about how often they felt bored, had an upset stomach, or had a headache, because children with more psychological distress experience these problems more frequently. The fraction saying they have these symptoms "most of the time" ranged from 3.7 percent for upset stomach, to 7.7 percent for boredom, to 11 percent for headache (Table 9). The fourth psychological variable we collected is self-esteem. This is measured by a thirty-six-item scale with five subscales: general or "global" self-esteem, peer self-esteem, family self-esteem, body self-esteem, and academic self-esteem (Table 11). The children also displayed a generally healthy sense of self-esteem.

### Parents and Children

I have argued that a major thrust of contemporary marketing to children is the interposition of the marketer between the parent and child. Marketers create utopian spaces free of parents and employ insidious dual-messaging strategies. Ads position the marketer with the child against the

Table 9  
Psychosomatic Outcomes  
(All Respondents)

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time
How often do you feel bored?	5.7%	30.9%	55.7%	7.7%
How often do you have an upset stomach?	12.3	46.7	37.3	3.7
How often do you have a headache?	9.7	37.8	41.5	11.0

Psychosomatic Outcomes  
(Doxley)

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time
How often do you feel bored?	4.4%	32.8%	56.4%	6.4%
How often do you have an upset stomach?	13.1	51.9	32.0	2.9
How often do you have a headache?	10.7	42.4	38.0	8.8

Psychosomatic Outcomes  
(Boston)

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time
How often do you feel bored?	8.5%	26.6%	54.3%	10.6%
How often do you have an upset stomach?	10.6	35.1	48.9	5.3
How often do you have a headache?	7.4	27.7	48.9	16.0

parent. These strategies raise the issue of whether marketing depictions of parents and children have any effects on real life relationships. Do children who are more exposed to antiadultism develop more negative attitudes to their parents? Does nag factor marketing make kids feel their parents are an impediment to acquisition? Or are these portrayals just good fun that kids don't take too seriously and adults shouldn't either?

From my interviews with Doxley parents I knew that there were plenty of kids who were fighting with their parents about consumer culture. I heard about rewards and punishments, privileges granted and denied, trust and lies. I was curious whether high media use and heavy psychological

**Table 10**  
**Depression and Anxiety (All Respondents)**

	Number of Items	Mean	Range
Children's Depression Inventory	17	21.7	17-43
Children's Anxiety Scale	16	27.1	16-32

Note: The Children's Depression Inventory is a 17-item scale, with higher scores indicating more depression. Anxiety is a 16-item scale, which is reversed-scored, that is, higher scores indicate less anxiety.

**Table 11**  
**Self-Esteem (All Respondents)**

	Number of Items	Mean	Range
Global Self-Esteem	8	16.9	11-29
Peer Self-Esteem	8	14.3	8-32
Family Self-Esteem	8	12.6	8-30
Body Self-Esteem	4	7.2	4-16
Academic Self-Esteem	8	13.9	8-29

Note: Lower score indicates higher self-esteem. Higher score indicates lower self-esteem.

involvement in consumer culture made those fights more likely and undermined good relationships between children and parents.

To test that theory, we asked the children to describe their feelings toward their primary parent and used those answers to create a "parental attitude" scale. (The primary parent was defined as the "person who mostly takes care of you . . . your mother, father, or another adult.") The first four statements measure whether the child feels the parent responds to his or her needs and come from an existing scale. Four new items were specifically oriented to common portrayals of parents in consumer culture: "She is not at all cool," "She doesn't understand what kids need to have these days," "She is boring," and "She is not too much fun to be around." Factor analysis found that all eight questions fit together (see Table 12).

**Table 12**  
**Parent-Child Relations (All Respondents)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
She (he) . . . makes me feel better when I am upset.	51.5%	38.0%	6.4%	4.1%
She (he) . . . listens to what I have to say.	46.8	39.3	10.2	3.7
She (he) . . . is too busy to talk to me.	6.5	9.6	36.2	47.8
She (he) . . . wants to hear about my problems.	52.7	33.7	9.5	4.1
She (he) . . . is not at all cool.	8.3	14.6	35.8	41.3
She (he) . . . doesn't understand what kids need to have these days.	13.7	14.3	32.8	39.2
She (he) . . . is boring.	6.5	6.2	32.2	55.1
She (he) . . . is not too much fun to be around.	7.5	5.4	29.2	58.0
	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
How often do you fight or disagree with your parents?	34.6	50.2	10.2	5.1

As expected, the children have positive views of their parents. Nearly 90 percent reported that their parent makes them feel better and wants to hear their problems, and roughly 85 percent say that their parent listens to them and that she (or he) is not too busy to talk. However, for the four questions that hew more closely to portrayals of parents in consumer culture, some of the results are less positive. Twenty-three percent report that their parent is not cool, and 28 percent agree that she doesn't understand what kids need. There were also differences between the two samples. The Boston children were more likely to be strongly positive about their parent. For example, 62 percent of the Boston children strongly agreed that their parent made them feel better, in comparison to only 47 percent in Doxley. Almost half of the Boston kids strongly disagreed that their

mother "doesn't understand what kids need to have these days," in comparison to only 35 percent of Doxley children.

We found similar distinctions when we asked the children about how often they fought with their parents and how often they disagreed about how much time they should spend watching television, or using other media, about time on the computer, and how much disagreement they had about "whether or not to buy you things you want." The Boston children revealed very low levels of fighting overall. Forty-eight percent said they "never or almost never" disagree or fight with their parents, compared to only 28 percent of the Doxley kids. Boston kids were also much less likely to disagree about media use or what their parents would buy them.

**Table 12a**  
**Parent-Child Relations (Doxley)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
She (he) . . . makes me feel better when I am upset.	47.1%	42.6%	5.9%	4.4%
She (he) . . . listens to what I have to say.	40.7	44.6	11.3	3.4
She (he) . . . is too busy to talk to me.	6.4	8.9	40.1	44.6
She (he) . . . wants to hear about my problems.	48.5	39.2	7.8	4.4
She (he) . . . is not at all cool.	7.6	14.1	42.9	35.4
She (he) . . . doesn't understand what kids need to have these days.	13.4	16.3	35.1	35.1
She (he) . . . is boring.	7.5	5.0	35.3	52.2
She (he) . . . is not too much fun to be around.	6.9	3.9	36.3	52.9
How often do you fight or disagree with your parents?	28.4	53.4	12.3	5.9

**Table 12b**  
**Parent-Child Relations (Boston)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
She (he) . . . makes me feel better when I am upset.	61.5%	27.5%	7.7%	3.3%
She (he) . . . listens to what I have to say.	60.4	27.5	7.7	4.4
She (he) . . . is too busy to talk to me.	6.6	11.0	27.5	54.9
She (he) . . . wants to hear about my problems.	62.2	21.1	13.3	3.3
She (he) . . . is not at all cool.	10.0	15.6	20.0	55.4
She (he) . . . doesn't understand what kids need to have these days.	14.3	9.9	27.5	48.4
She (he) . . . is boring.	4.4	8.8	25.3	61.5
She (he) . . . is not too much fun to be around.	8.8	8.8	13.2	69.2
How often do you fight or disagree with your parents?	48.4	42.9	5.5	3.3

### From Correlation to Causality

One of the longstanding issues in social science research is that much of its analysis shows that two factors are related to each other, or what is called correlated, rather than that one causes the other. A common research technique for establishing correlation is regression analysis. As a first step, we estimated a variety of regression models to test whether the well-being measures were correlated to consumer involvement. As expected, we found that they are. The children who are more involved in consumer culture are more depressed, more anxious, have lower self-esteem, and suffer from more psychosomatic complaints.

Although regression analysis is common, its findings of correlation are limited. One worry is that the causality is actually the reverse of what the model is assuming. For example, we hypothesized that children with higher levels of consumer involvement are more likely to get depressed and anxious. The causality is going from consumer involvement to depression and anxiety. But perhaps the connection is reversed, and children deal with their anxiety by accumulating stuff because they find it soothing. Maybe depressed kids seek out television because they don't have the energy for other activities or because it helps them forget their emotional pain. We all know about the hyper kids who can't tear themselves away from the video console, or image-obsessed teens poring over fashion magazines. Much of the discussion on media and consumer culture has gone around and around on just this issue. Chicken or egg?

To resolve questions of causality, we used a more sophisticated statistical technique called structural equation modeling, which allows us to infer causality. With the structural model, we specify all the possible causal relationships in advance, and then the computer estimates them all and tests to see which are best supported by the data. It also takes into account all the other variables in the model and all the possible directions of causality that they present. It's a powerful tool that allows analysts to make statements about causes.

To construct our model, we considered each of the possible causal relationships among the four basic variables: media use, the consumer involvement scale, the parental attitude scale, and for each model, one of the well-being variables (anxiety, depression, self-esteem, or psychosomatic complaints). We tested to see whether children who watch a lot of media develop more consumerist values, or whether the kids who already have high consumer involvement opt for more screen time. Similarly,

we asked whether children who already have poor psychological functioning gravitate toward consumer culture, or whether involvement in consumer culture causes poor functioning. We tested to see whether media use directly affects psychological outcomes—for example, if watching more television leads to more depression or anxiety. This might occur because there are physiological effects of viewing, such as the lowering of metabolic rates or reduced exercise levels. Or it might be that program content, which depicts high levels of conflict, violence, and crime, causes people to be more fearful or anxious. Or perhaps the reverse is true: children who are already depressed and anxious might seek out television as a way to relax and calm their fears. Finally, we tested whether consumer involvement causes more negative attitudes toward parents and also the reverse—whether children who already have negative relationships with their parents are more likely to become heavily involved in consumer culture. We tested to see whether poor relationships with parents affect psychological well-being and, conversely, whether children with poorer psychological health become more negative about their parents.

We included what are called background, or "control," variables. These are typically not variables of great theoretical interest, because they represent previously established relationships. For example, research has shown that many psychological outcome variables differ by sex, race, and socioeconomic status. So we included measures of sex, age, race, parents' marital status, and parents' education level. In the pictures below, they are represented as control variables. (As is standard in analysis of this type, we also tested other control variables but did not include those that were not statistically related to our outcome measure.)

### Statistical Results: Consumer Involvement Undermines Children's Well-Being

The estimates provide strong support for our hypotheses. High consumer involvement is a significant cause of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints. Psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they become more enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending. Children with emotional problems will be helped if they disengage from the worlds that corporations are constructing for them. The effects operate in both directions and are symmetric. That is, less involvement in consumer culture leads to healthier kids, and more involvement leads kids' psychological well-being to deteriorate. These

results are depicted in Figures 1 to 4—one for each psychological outcome. Each of the arrows in the diagram indicates a statistically significant causal relationship from one variable to the other. The number above the line is the estimated coefficient for that relationship. The effects are large in magnitude, and they are what we call "robust." That means that the results are reproduced in virtually all the different models that we tested. (In order to establish the robustness of a result, researchers typically estimate many different models, adding and subtracting variables, using different parts of the sample, and so on.) In the many regression equations and structural equation models we estimated, the results for consumer involvement were very consistent.

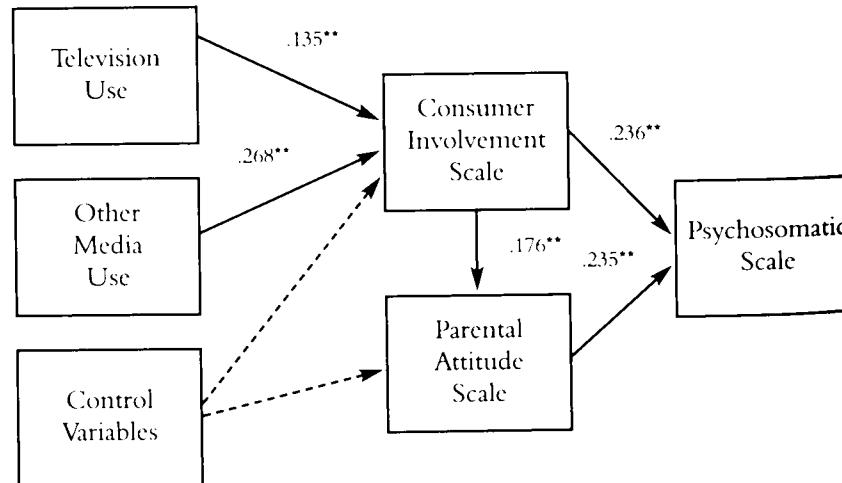
By contrast, we did not find a significant effect in the reverse direction, and hence no solid arrow appears in the figure. Being depressed or anxious or having low self-esteem does not cause higher levels of consumer involvement. This result was consistent across all the models and different specifications. These are the results that led me to stop discounting the

experiences of Greg, Doug, and the other children with problems and to realize that consumer culture was more damaging than I had imagined.

A second finding is that media use matters, but its effect flows through consumer involvement. The model yields the commonsense finding that children who spend more time watching television and using other media become more involved in consumer culture. Television induces discontent with what one has, it creates an orientation to possessions and money, and it causes children to care more about brands, products, and consumer values.

But media use does not operate directly on either psychological functioning or attitudes toward parents. There is no direct causal arrow between media use and depression or between media use and parental attitudes. Rather, when we use media, we process the effects through a cognitive and psychological structure. Furthermore, and very much counter to my prior expectations, we do not find that media use is caused by any of the variables we included in the model. Depression and anxiety do not

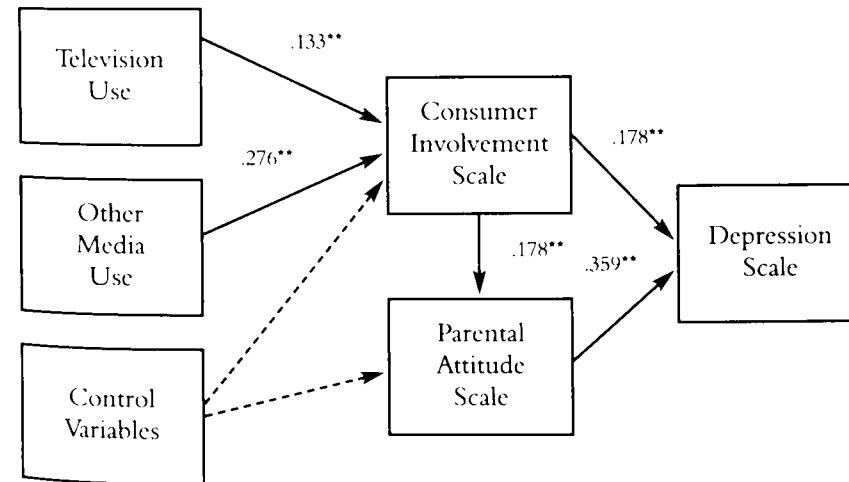
**Figure 1**  
**Causal Model of Psychosomatic Outcomes**



Note: The number presented is the standardized regression coefficient.  
Sample size equals 300.

\*\*Indicates that the p-value is less than .05, and thereby statistically significant.

**Figure 2**  
**Causal Model of Depression**



Note: The number presented is the standardized regression coefficient.  
Sample size equals 300.

\*\*Indicates that the p-value is less than .05, and thereby statistically significant.

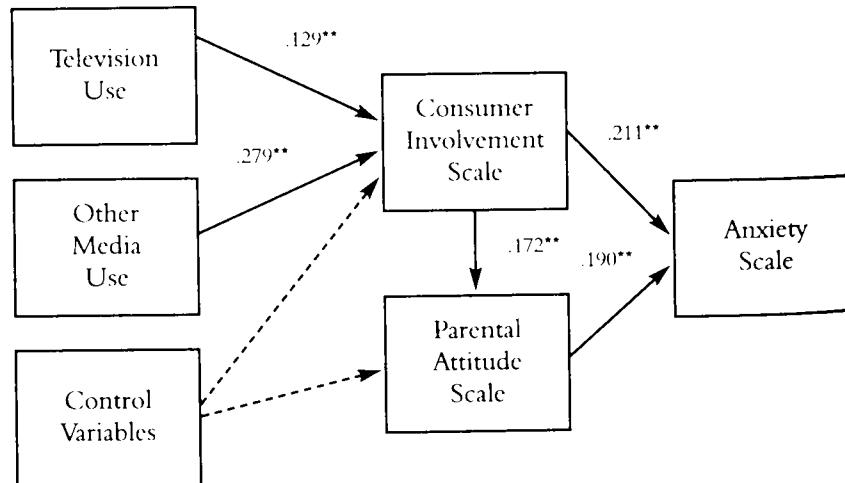
lead to more screen time. Children who are more alienated from their parents do not seem to seek refuge in televisions, computers, or video games. In this sample at least, psychological distress is not driving media use.

Relationships between parents and children are also an important part of the story. Higher levels of consumer involvement result in worse relationships with parents (as measured by both the parental attitude scale and the likelihood of fighting or disagreeing with parents). That's the first causal link. The second is that as children's relations with their parents deteriorate, there is an additional negative effect on well-being. Relating poorly to parents leads to more depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, and more psychosomatic complaints. Consumer culture packs a double wallop, operating through both this direct and an indirect channel. Surprisingly, there are no effects in the reverse direction. Poor psychological outcomes such as depression and anxiety do not cause relations with parents to deteriorate, nor does a poor relationship with parents lead to higher consumer involvement.

This finding has an important footnote, however. Although our estimates for the whole sample of 300 children found a significant causal relationship between consumer involvement and relationships with parents, other analyses led us to suspect that this finding was due to the fact that Doxley kids represent two-thirds of the sample. So we estimated the model separately for the two groups, and our suspicions were confirmed: that link is absent for the Boston sample.

The descriptive data show that the Boston children articulate extremely positive attitudes toward their primary parents. These attitudes may form a protective shield against the negative portrayals of parents in consumer culture and insulate these children from the kinds of conflicts found among the suburban kids. By contrast, although Doxley children are also positive about their parents, they are less so. They report more fighting with their parents about issues of access to consumer culture. It may be that in Doxley, parental attempts to limit their children's media use or involvement in consumer culture lead to a backlash among some of the

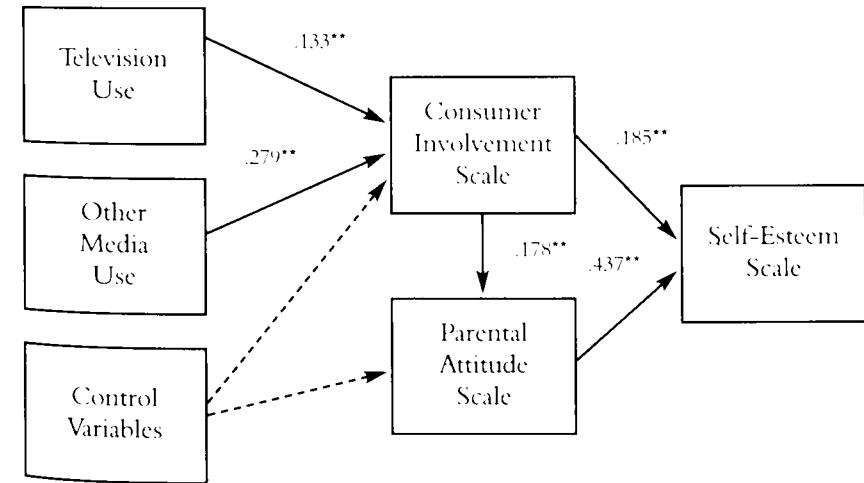
**Figure 3**  
**Causal Model of Anxiety**



Note: The number presented is the standardized regression coefficient.  
Sample size equals 300.

\*\*Indicates that the p-value is less than .05, and thereby statistically significant.

**Figure 4**  
**Causal Model of Self-Esteem**



Note: The number presented is the standardized regression coefficient.  
Sample size equals 300.

\*\*Indicates that the p-value is less than .05, and thereby statistically significant.

highly consumer-involved children, who resent these restrictions. Quite a few of the Doxley mothers were vigilant about screening out objectionable media, keeping a tight rein on media time, and controlling their children's purchasing behavior. I did not do comparable parental interviews in Boston. However, we do know that in Boston, where media use and consumer involvement are higher, there are also lower levels of parental restrictions on media. For example, among children who report that their parents have television restrictions, the median hours permitted per week are twice as high in Boston as in Doxley (ten versus five hours). There may also be differences between the two sites in attitudes toward consumer culture more broadly. Middle- and upper-middle-class white parents have historically had especially ambivalent and critical attitudes to children's consumer culture, in part because of its low cultural status. Perhaps parental disapproval of commercialized culture in Doxley may be part of what is driving a wedge between parents and their children.

### Interpreting the Results

These statistical findings do not tell us exactly how consumer involvement affects psychological outcomes, only that it does. Nevertheless, it may be useful to speculate on how the relationship operates. One possibility is that the consumer involvement scale is registering strong feelings of dissatisfaction, unfulfilled longing, and a keen sense of social comparison. The negative power of these kinds of feelings and values has been well documented by psychologists. People who are more envious of others, worry more about how much they have, have stronger desires to acquire money and possessions, and place more importance on financial success are more likely to be depressed and anxious. This interpretation is consistent with additional analyses of the three subscales. The dissatisfaction subscale had much stronger effects on the outcome variables than consumer orientation and brand awareness. Desiring less, rather than getting more, seems to be the key to contentment and well-being. Certainly that is one conclusion to draw from these results.

A second hypothesis is that consumer involvement detracts from other beneficial activities and behaviors. Research on the impacts of television find that its negative relation to reading scores is partly due to the fact that it undermines reading practice, especially for children who have not yet mastered the skills. Perhaps something similar is going on with consumerism. Children who are more consumerist may be less oriented to

socializing with their peers, siblings, and parents, and they may have poorer social connections overall. They may be less engaged in satisfying, creative, and educational activities such as reading, unstructured play, or physical activity. They may have less rich fantasy lives, as some of the literature on television suggests. Perhaps the mechanism is mainly that consumer culture becomes a substitute for what keeps kids happy and healthy. The data we have do not allow us to test this hypothesis directly. To do so, we'd have had to collect information on how children use their time. In retrospect, it would have been useful to do so. But the survey was already long, and accurate time-use data are difficult to acquire, especially with children. One piece of relevant evidence from our data is that high levels of consumer involvement reduce children's self-esteem in the areas of peer and family relationships. This is what we'd expect if consumer involvement pushes out strong social connections.

American children are deeply enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending, and they are getting more so. We find that the more enmeshed they are, the more they suffer for it. The more they buy into the commercial and materialist messages, the worse they feel about themselves, the more depressed they are, and the more they are beset by anxiety, headaches, stomachaches, and boredom. The bottom line on the culture they're being raised in is that it's a lot more pernicious than most adults have been willing to admit.

### Materialism and Psychological Distress: The Evidence Accumulates

The literature that comes closest to this perspective is from psychology and investigates how materialist values are related to well-being. There are now scores of studies, using a variety of methodologies and sample populations. An excellent review of this literature by one of its leading scholars, Tim Kasser, is *The High Price of Materialism*. Materialist values are typically measured by asking people about their degree of agreement with a series of statements about money, possessions, and consumption. For example, Kasser and Richard Ryan, of the University of Rochester, collected data on financial aspirations (having a high-paying job, being financially successful, buying things just because you want them), social goals (being famous, admired), and appearance (keeping up with fashions, achieving the right look). Other measures, such as Marcia Richins and Scott Dawson's widely cited materialism scale, focus on desires for success, how cen-

tral consumption is to people, and happiness. Russell Belk's scale rates envy, possessiveness, and nongenerosity. Kasser has also asked people to state their own goals and then coded the answers according to how materialist they are.

After evaluating the extent of materialism across a sample of the population, many of these studies relate it to psychological outcomes. Kasser and Ryan found in an important study that people with higher financial aspirations scored lower on measures of self-actualization and vitality. They also had lower levels of community affiliation. Subsequent work found even more associations. Materialism is correlated with lower self-esteem. It is correlated with higher rates of depression and anxiety. Materialism is related to psychological distress and difficulty adapting to life. People who value money and conventional success are less likely to experience positive emotions, such as happiness and joy, and they are more likely to experience negative ones, such as anger and unhappiness. Materialism is also related to elevated levels of physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, backaches, sore muscles, and sore throats. These results have been found in samples of men and women, teens and adults, across income groups, and for students and nonstudents. And they hold up across countries, as this type of research has now been replicated in many places around the globe. The clear conclusion of all this work is that the more strongly a person subscribes to materialist values, the poorer is his or her quality of life.

A number of the materialism studies have involved teens. Findings include the fact that adolescents who have more materialist values are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and illegal drug use. They are more likely to suffer from personality disorders such as narcissism, separation anxiety disorder, paranoia, and attention deficit disorder. And they are less likely to be doing well in life realms such as school, jobs, and extracurricular activities. Materialism is also correlated with carrying weapons, skipping school, and vandalism.

One of the issues this research raises is whether materialism causes these negative outcomes or is merely associated with them. Perhaps distressed people adopt materialism as a value system. For example, some of the research finds that teens who are economically deprived or whose parents display low levels of nurturing behavior exhibit higher levels of materialism. Researchers argue that when people's basic needs are not met or they are exposed to conditions of insecurity, they become more materialistic. And as they take on more materialist lifestyles, they are less likely to do the life-affirming things that create true well-being. Kasser has attempted to

get at the causality issue in a study with Ken Shelton, drawing on a field of research called terror management. They asked half the participants to write about their own death (the terror condition) while the control group wrote about music. Those who were assigned the former task later exhibited significantly higher rates of materialist values. What Kasser and others conclude is that there is a circular effect in which materialism and poor functioning are self-reinforcing. That kind of complex interaction means that the simplistic terms on which marketers typically defend their activities are often off the mark. It is to that debate that I now turn.