watching, wanting and wellbeing: exploring the links

a study of 9 to 13-year-olds

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NCC National
Consumer Council

Making all consumers matter

About the authors

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Foreword

This research is the first in the UK to explore in depth the connections between the wellbeing of our children and the commercial world that surrounds them. The research follows pioneering work by the National Consumer Council (NCC), which has highlighted the extensive involvement of children in commercial life and is published in a context of growing concern about the quality of childhood and the state of children's health and wellbeing.

The data came from 557 children aged 9-13 – the 'tween' years – across six schools, who completed an extensive structured questionnaire. The findings point to the complexity of connections between three spheres of children's experience – their exposure to media and marketing, their sense of materialism in terms of what they value, and their wellbeing. Each of these raises methodological issues in terms of how they should be measured and understood. The report warns against simplistic claims, whether by commercial advocates of more marketing to children or by critics who argue that there is a 'loss of childhood' underway in Britain.

The NCC has placed listening to children's views at the heart of its advocacy to ensure that the rights of children are protected. We promote their active involvement in shaping the world around them. In 2005 the NCC published the research report *Shopping generation*, which the National Children's Bureau described as 'a landmark study'.[1] This study surveyed one thousand 10-19-year-olds and ran discussion groups with 11-16-year-olds. The children who took part came up with the following suggestions for a *Children's Agenda on Consumer Life:*

- ▶ Be honest and upfront about products and services.

- ▶ Treat young people with respect and take them seriously.

- ▶ Curb the use of inappropriate advertising aimed at younger people.

- ▶ Put tighter controls on advertising for products that are bad for young people.

The NCC made recommendations to put this into practice, including:

- ▶ Children's Commissioners in the UK to take up and explore the issue of children's experience as consumers.

- ▶ Ending the abuses of internet marketing to children, through regulating promotions and classifying children's personal information as sensitive, requiring parental consent.

- ▶ The Treasury to publish, on a quarterly basis, a Children's Wellbeing Index.

These concerns have moved centre-stage in recent months. The Children's Society has launched the Good Childhood Inquiry. The NCC is sympathetic to the concerns expressed by experts in a letter to *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper in September 2006 that children:

' *…still need what developing human beings have always needed, including real food (as opposed to processed 'junk'), real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives…*'[2]

This report also confirms that parents and children need life skills to make their way through today's commercial world. The report uncovers how far children have unsupervised access to TV and the internet. Efforts to improve media literacy among parents and children need to be strengthened. The communications regulator, Ofcom is well placed to develop and cost a

national strategy for media literacy, in concert with a wide range of partners. Ofcom has supported the development of media literacy networks in the nations – Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Such a strategy could focus on households where children use media extensively, where their media exposure is unsupervised, and where children are less likely to question whether adverts are truthful.

I want to acknowledge and thank Agnes Nairn, Jo Ormrod and Paul Bottomley for their passion and professionalism in conducting this research. Their findings reinforce the need for action, both to understand and to improve the impact of commercial life on family dynamics and children's wellbeing.

Ed Mayo

Executive summary

There is growing public concern that heavy media exposure is making our children more materialistic and that this, in turn, has a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing. Partly because the terms involved are hard to define, hard to measure and hard to associate, there is a lack of empirical data to give substance to these concerns.

This study – the first attempt to examine the empirical links between watching, wanting and wellbeing in UK children – has been conducted in the hopes that by providing some working definitions, reliable measurement tools and robust evidence it will help academics, policy-makers and everyone who works with children to gain an increased understanding of the issues.

Our findings resonate with recent studies in the USA[3] and Holland:[4]

▶ Children who spend more time in front of the TV or computer screen are more materialistic.

▶ Children who are more materialistic tend to have lower self-esteem.

▶ They have a lower opinion of their parents.

▶ Children who have a poor opinion of their parents also argue with them more.

▶ Children who have a poor opinion of their parents also have a poor opinion of themselves.

The links between watching, wanting and wellbeing appear to operate through family dynamics. More research is needed to explore the nature of these family tensions and what might alleviate them.

Watching

This research measured children's watching habits in more detail than has been done before. We found that children are watching TV before school, after school, during dinner and in bed. Over 15 per cent 'always' watch TV during meals. Seventy per cent have a TV in their room and most of those also have a video or DVD player. Children do not just watch programmes designed for them: over half of our sample watch soaps and sports, 40 per cent watch horror and a third watch reality TV.

Nine to 13-year-olds spend more time in front of the TV than on the computer, but about a quarter say they at least sometimes use the computer while eating. Nearly half of all the children in our survey have a computer in their bedrooms. They like to play games most of all, but they also use the computer to chat to their friends and to surf the web.

Wanting

Over half of the children think they would be happier if they had more money to buy things for themselves. Nearly that many think the only kind of job they want when they grow up is one that gets them lots of money. Exactly 50 per cent of our sample say they like buying the same things their friends have.

Wellbeing

Nearly nine in ten children believe that 'I have a number of good qualities' and 83 per cent say 'I feel good about myself'. Over seven in ten say 'I feel that I'm a person of value, at least as valuable as other people'. Nearly one in eight disagrees that 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of'.

Boys had slightly higher self-esteem than girls, reflecting other research in this area.[5]

Most children have a good opinion of their parents. Mums are considered slightly more favourably than dads: 18 per cent say mum is not at all cool and 20 per cent say dad is not at all cool. A similar percentage of kids say neither parent is cool. Nine per cent say mum is boring and 12 per cent say dad is boring. Most children argue with their parents at least some of the time about screen time and other issues.

Diverse experiences

The schools participating in the survey were located at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum (for further details, see the section on methodology, below). Our findings show that watching and wanting differ dramatically between deprived and affluent areas, while wellbeing is broadly similar.

Watching: We found that children in affluent areas spend substantially less time in front of TV and computer screens. Nearly half of the affluent children have televisions in their bedrooms; 97 per cent of the sample in deprived areas do. Likewise, while just under a third of the affluent children have a computer in their room, nearly two thirds of the deprived children have one.

Children in deprived areas are six times more likely to be watching TV during the weekday evening meal, and four times more likely to watch TV in bed before going to sleep. One in four children from deprived areas watches TV at lunchtime on Sunday, compared with nearly one in thirty from the better-off neighbourhoods.

Less than half of the children from disadvantaged areas list children's programmes in their top three favourite programmes; nearly three-quarters in affluent areas do. Almost 30 per cent more disadvantaged kids watch music TV; 25 per cent more watch horror; and 13 per cent more watch soaps. Twice as many of the children from the affluent areas, on the other hand, watch nature programmes and documentaries.

Wanting: Children in deprived areas are much more motivated by money: 69 per cent agree that the only kind of job they want when they grow up is one that gets them lots of money, compared with 28 per cent in affluent areas. Acquiring material possessions is also more important: 47 per cent agree that they would rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else, compared with 23 per cent of those in the well-off areas.

Wellbeing: Perhaps surprisingly, given the links between watching, wanting and wellbeing, self-esteem scores, opinions of parents and levels of family rows were broadly similar in the two groups of children. Future research should examine the way in which materialism, self-esteem and family relationships interact in households across the social spectrum.

The socio-economic differences are perhaps the most important part of our findings. They show quite clearly that media influence is not exerted evenly across our society.

Our research has looked at an element of UK children's lives that has not been studied before, and will provide food for thought for anyone who is seeking to understand the relationship between commercialism and children's wellbeing in our society.

Research Background

This research is a response to our increasing need to understand the dynamic interplay between childhood wellbeing, materialistic orientation and time spent in front of the TV and computer screen. Concern over the contentment of British children appears to have risen since the simultaneous publication of two American books in 2004, one written by economist and sociologist Juliet Schor[6] and the other from the perspective of psychology[7] Both books highlight the problematic effects of children's current levels of involvement in consumer culture and exposure to materialistic attitudes. Some consumer involvement aspects of the Schor study were replicated by the National Consumer Council,[8] and their findings led them to call for research and a public debate on the extent to which materialism and mental health issues in UK children might be associated.

The issue is often in the UK headlines with the publicity surrounding the above-mentioned letter to *The Daily Telegraph* voicing concern over negative influences on children; a new book on how the modern world is damaging children;[9] and a report on the commercialisation of childhood.[10]

The effect of materialistic values on children's psychological wellbeing has also become a focus for academic research as psychologists, marketers and sociologists (among others) have begun to look in depth at the psychological consequences of consumer culture. Studies have examined not only the direct effects of consumer culture on children's wellbeing but also the role played by gender, socio-economic group and family structure.[11] Results from such research have been illuminating but, as yet, far from clear cut.

The objective of this research project was to empirically investigate the interaction between time spent in front of the TV and computer screen, materialistic orientation and childhood wellbeing in the UK. We have defined this continuum as 'watching', 'wanting' and 'wellbeing'. Additionally, we decided to investigate the variables of age, gender and socio-economic group within this interaction. With tentative empirical evidence[12] and – crucially – no coherent theoretical framework[13] investigating a childhood materialism/wellbeing link poses an academic challenge which must be taken up if we are to see a more informed and nuanced debate in both the public and academic spheres.

Methodology

For the purpose of our research we defined some key terms in specific ways, which are listed below.

Watching is defined as time spent in front of the TV and computer screen, along with attitude to advertising.

Wanting is defined as a set of personal values which include the notion that money can make you happy, that possessions are a sign of success and that owning objects is a satisfying pursuit in its own right. These values can alter over the course of a person's life.

Wellbeing is defined as the child's degree of global self-esteem, parent–child conflict and the child's attitude towards parents. These attributes are all closely linked to psychological stability and later life adjustment.

Measures

Watching is measured on a new scale developed for this research. Attitude to advertising is measured using an established children's scale (Derbaix & Pecheux, 2003).[14]

Wanting is measured using the Goldberg et al. (2003) youth materialism scale developed for children in the 9-14 age group.[15]

Wellbeing is measured using the well-regarded Rosenberg self-esteem scale and additional questions on disagreement with and attitudes towards parents.[16]

The questionnaire

We gathered the data for this exploration through a quantitative questionnaire consisting of 140 questions. It was inspired by one used by Juliet Schor in the USA in 2000/2001.[17] We worked with small groups of school children to adapt it for use in the UK in 2006.

Our survey took place in the spring of 2006 in six schools with the kind participation of 557 children aged 9-13. Parents and children all gave their consent in accordance with the guidelines of the Market Research Society and University Ethics Codes. In the primary schools every child in years 5 and 6 (age 9-11) present on the day of the survey took part; in the secondary schools we had the participation of every child present in years 7 and 8 (age 11-13). The survey was taken by a more or less equal number of boys (48 per cent) and girls (52 per cent) and a more or less equal number of junior (47 per cent) and senior school (53 per cent) children.

The schools were classified using the Index of Multiple Deprivation calculated by the National Statistics Office (2006), which compares national and local measures of income, employment, health, education, barriers to housing and services, living environment and crime rates. Two primary schools and one secondary school were located in areas ranking in the most affluent 15 per cent and two primary schools and one secondary school in areas ranking in the most deprived 15 per cent.

All the affluent school locations consist mostly of larger properties, the majority of habitants being professional people of high socio-economic status. The school locations of the deprived category are characterised by generally low socio-economic status, high unemployment rates and communities with very few homeowners (National Statistics, 2006).

Analysis

We have cross–tabulated the data by age, sex and socio-economic group. Where we compare frequencies (for example, the percentage of boys versus the percentage of girls who

say they watch particular types of programme), the *chi-square* statistic is used. This tests whether there is a statistically significant and systematic association between two variables (for example, programme preference and sex).

Where we compare a mean (for example, average score for junior school children as against an average for senior school children) the *t test* is used. This tests whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other.

Throughout this report differences are only noted if they are statistically significant at the 0.05 level, which means that there is only a five per cent chance that these findings could be the result of chance.

We built a number of path models using regression analysis to test the associations between watching, wanting and wellbeing. Our models were similar to those tested in recent studies in Holland and the USA. More details on the analysis of the models can be found in Chapter Four.

1 Watching

The aim of the first part of our questionnaire was to create a quantifiable and reliable measure of 'watching' (TV and computer use) for correlation with our measures of 'wanting' (materialism) and 'wellbeing' (self-esteem and family relationships). Most equivalent surveys simply ask children to estimate how many hours they spend watching TV or using the computer. We felt that children (particularly the younger ones) would be unable to estimate accurately how many hours they spent in front of the TV or computer. We chose, instead, to use a concrete list of instances of media use linked to the rhythmical intervals of everyday life. We produced 17 items split into weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays, such as 'Do you watch TV in the morning before school?' or 'Do you use the computer on Sunday evenings after dinner?'. We offered four response options: 'never', 'some days', 'most days', and 'every day'.

These responses scored one to four respectively, giving a minimum possible score of 17 (all answers being 'never') and a maximum score of 68 (all answers being 'every day'). From this we calculated the children's individual TV and computer scores in addition to an overall figure.

Given the current debate on whether, how and when commercial companies should be allowed to advertise to children, we felt that it was important to gather children's views on adverts. We used a standardised and validated set of questions developed specifically to measure the global attitude towards TV advertising among children aged 8-12.[18] These assess both whether children like TV advertising and whether they believe it.

Part one: TV use

Table 1 shows the TV watching habits of our whole sample. As noted above, our measurement techniques numbered TV scores from 17-68; within this, the average or mean score was 40.69. We found no difference in average TV score by age group or by sex, but there was a significant difference between the two socio-economic groups. The score for the deprived areas we surveyed was 46.7, compared with 35.7 for the affluent areas. Children in the deprived areas had significantly higher scores on every single one of the 17 questions. A comparison of the most avid TV watchers (those who ticked the 'every day' option) illustrates the point well – see Table 2.

Children in deprived areas are six times more likely to watch TV during the evening meal on weekdays, and four times more likely to watch TV in bed before going to sleep, than children in affluent areas. They are nearly four times more likely to watch TV in the morning before school. Nine times as many deprived households as affluent ones have the TV on during Sunday lunchtime. These figures suggest two very different patterns of involvement with media, amounting almost to two separate cultures.

Table 1: TV watching across whole sample

a: Weekdays

%

I watch TV...

	never	some days	most days	every day
...in the morning before school	27	38	13	22
...when I come home from school	3	43	35	29
...during my evening meal	31	36	17	16
...after my evening meal	9	36	29	26
...in bed before going to sleep	41	22	12	25

Table 1: TV watching across whole sample

b: Saturdays

%

I watch TV...

	never	some days	most days	every day
...in the morning	10	29	31	29
...during lunch	34	37	16	14
...in the afternoon	14	38	28	20
...during my evening meal	34	31	17	19
...after my evening meal	19	36	27	28
...in bed before going to sleep	38	18	13	30
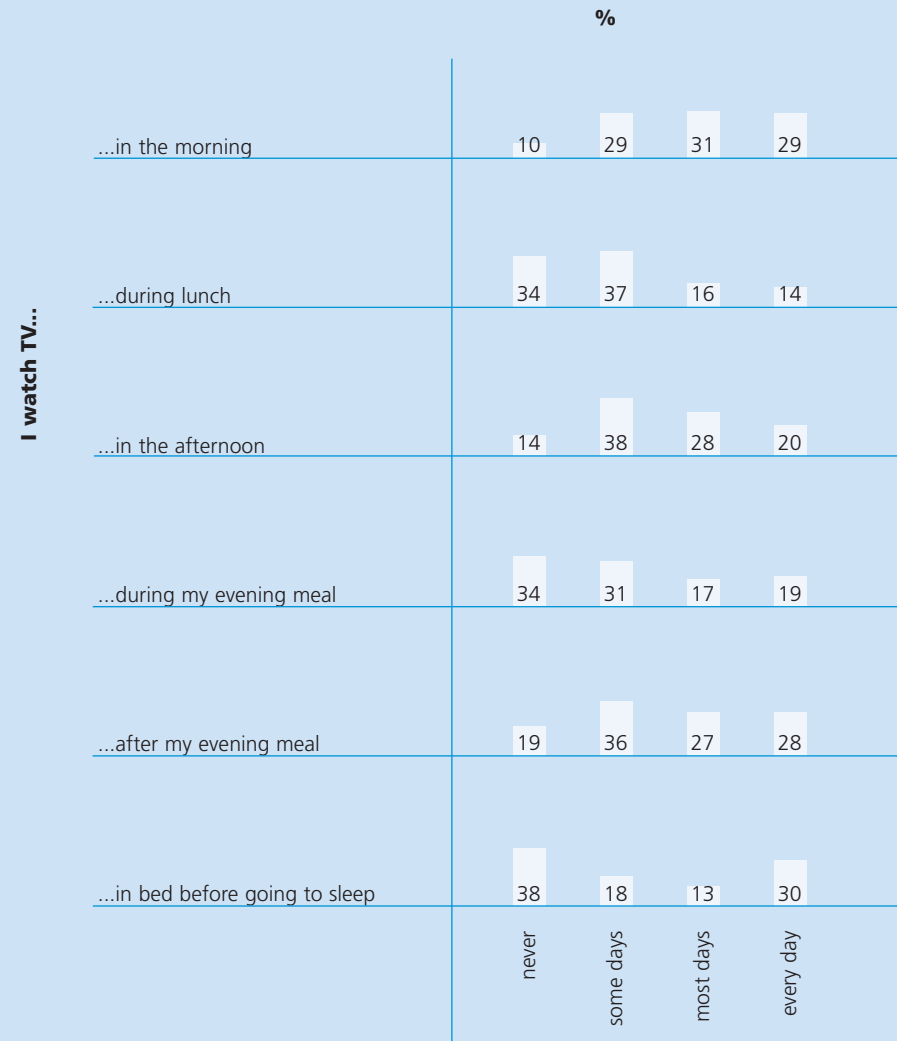
Table 1: TV watching across whole sample

c: Sundays

I watch TV...	never	some days	most days	every day
...in the morning	17	33	24	26
...during lunch	42	32	13	13
...in the afternoon	14	41	26	19
...during my evening meal	40	30	16	16
...after my evening meal	11	41	25	24
...in bed before going to sleep	43	19	11	27

%
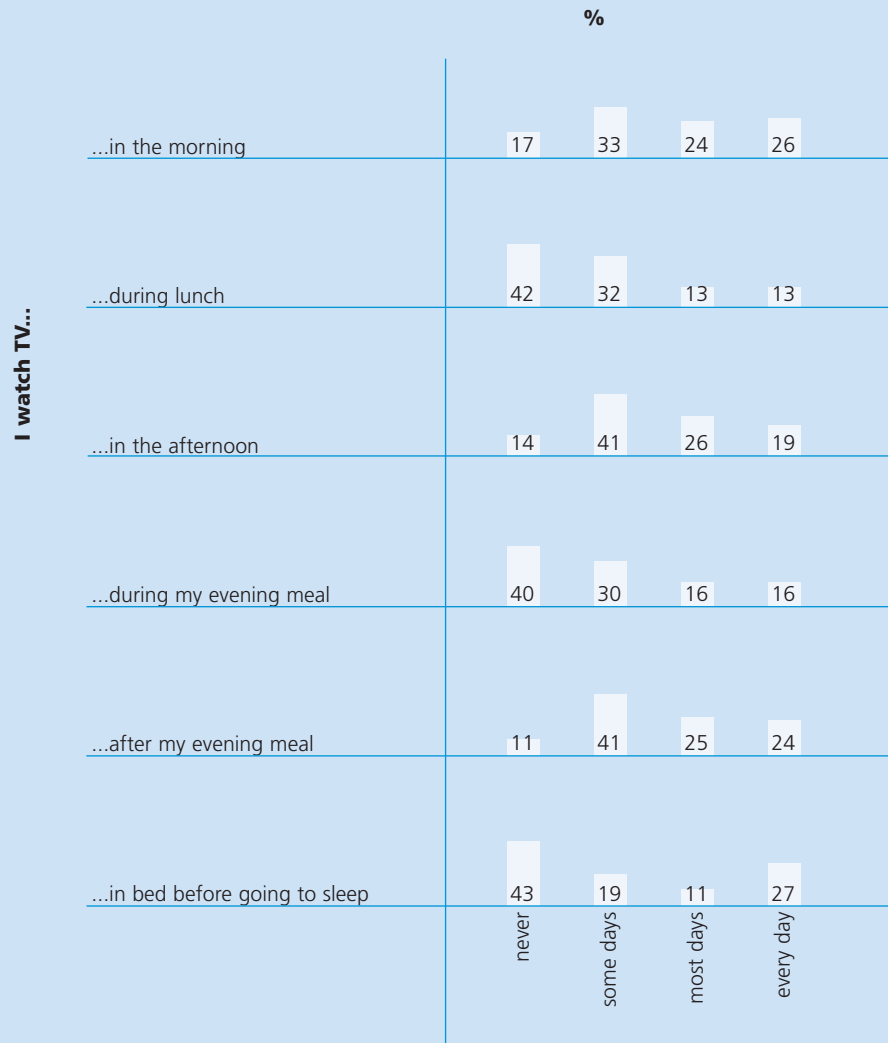
Table 2: TV watching, by socio-economic group: 'every day'

a: Weekdays

Every weekday I watch TV...	affluent	deprived
...in the morning before school	9	37
...when I come home from school	19	41
...during my evening meal	5	30
...after my evening meal	19	36
...in bed before going to sleep	10	43

%

Table 2: TV watching, by socio-economic group: 'every Saturday'

b: Saturdays

%

Every Saturday I watch TV...

	affluent	deprived
...in the morning	19	42
...during lunch	4	26
...in the afternoon	12	29
...during my evening meal	7	32
...after my evening meal	18	40
...in bed before going to sleep	15	49

Table 2: TV watching, by socio-economic group: 'every Sunday'

c: Sundays

%

Every Sunday I watch TV...

	affluent	deprived
...in the morning	16	38
...during lunch	3	26
...in the afternoon	7	32
...during my evening meal	6	27
...after my evening meal	10	48
...in bed before going to sleep	15	49

Table 3: TV, DVD, video in own room, by socio-economic group

	affluent	deprived
TV in the bedroom	48	97
Video or DVD in the bedroom	41	93

(%)
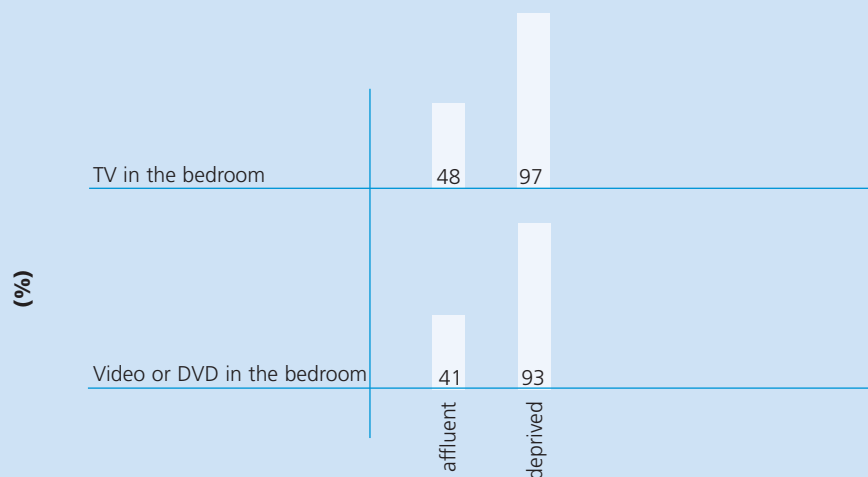
Table 4: Types of programmes watched, by total sample

Type of programme watched	% of total sample
Films	78
Children's programmes	72
Comedy	70
Music channels	61
Sports	56
Soaps	55
Horror	44
Reality programmes	34
Nature programmes	31
Documentaries	24
Lifestyle programmes	19

Almost all children in the deprived areas say they have TV and recording equipment in their rooms, compared with less than half of affluent children – giving them more opportunities for unsupervised viewing than their affluent counterparts (Table 3).

This is a very striking contrast and says much about divergent attitudes to material culture. Although we did not capture income figures, we can suppose that the families in the affluent areas can afford to buy their children their own TVs. However, they have chosen not to.

Programmes watched

In April 2007, Ofcom introduced measures to restrict TV advertising of junk food and drink products (those containing high levels of salt, ffat or sugar) during children's programmes[19] It has been argued that this will be an ineffective tactic given the growing evidence that

children also watch programmes aimed at adults.[20] Our results provide more evidence that children do not just watch programmes designed for them. While 72 per cent of the 9–13-year-olds in our sample do watch children's programmes, 61 per cent also watch music channels. Over half watch soaps and sports, a third watch reality TV, and 40 per cent watch horror (see Table 4). Films are the most popular viewing material, but we do not know if these are films aimed at adults or children.

We asked the children to tell us what type of programmes they watched most often, second–most often, and third–most often. This data is shown in Table 5, where we have also ranked the programme types that make up the children's 'top three'. While 59 per cent of children do spend most time watching children's programmes, over a third favour music TV, soaps and sports. Any policy that purports

to curb advertising to children must target these types of programmes.

We found differences in the children's viewing habits by age and sex. Junior school children are far more likely than senior school children to watch children's programmes and nature programmes, whereas senior school children are more likely to watch films, comedy, music TV and soaps (see Table 6). Viewing of sports programmes, horror, reality TV, documentaries and lifestyle programmes remains constant as children get older.

Girls and boys also have different viewing preferences. A significantly greater number of girls watch children's programmes than boys; more girls also watch music channels, soaps and reality programmes. By contrast, the boys tended to watch more sports, comedy, horror and documentaries (Table 7).

The amount of time spent watching each particular type of programme also varied by age (Table 8). By 12 or 13 only 44 per cent of children put children's programmes in their top three, in comparison with 76 per cent of children just a couple of years younger. This implies that banning junk food advertising during children's programmes will affect less than half of 12 and 13-year-olds.

Table 9 shows that while two thirds of girls cite children's programmes in their top three, only half of all the boys in the sample do: they are just as likely to be watching sports or comedy. This has implications for advertising regulation.

As well as sex and age driving preference in TV programmes, we found broad differences in viewing habits by socio-economic status for most (but not all) programmes (Table 10). Children in the deprived areas seemed to have 'older' tastes than those in the affluent areas. Two-

thirds of the children in deprived areas said they watched children's programmes, compared with over three quarters in the affluent areas. Almost 30 per cent more say they watch music channels; 25 per cent more watch horror; and 14 per cent more watch soaps. Children from the affluent areas, on the other hand, are more than twice as likely to watch nature programmes and documentaries.

Table 11 shows a similar pattern for the amount of time spent on different types of programmes. Less than half of the children in the deprived areas (and over two-thirds for the affluent group) include children's programmes in their top three. Nineteen per cent more include horror, 18 per cent more include music channels; and nine per cent more include soaps. By contrast, 19 per cent more children from affluent homes include nature programmes in their top three, 11 per cent more include comedy, and 10 per cent more include films.
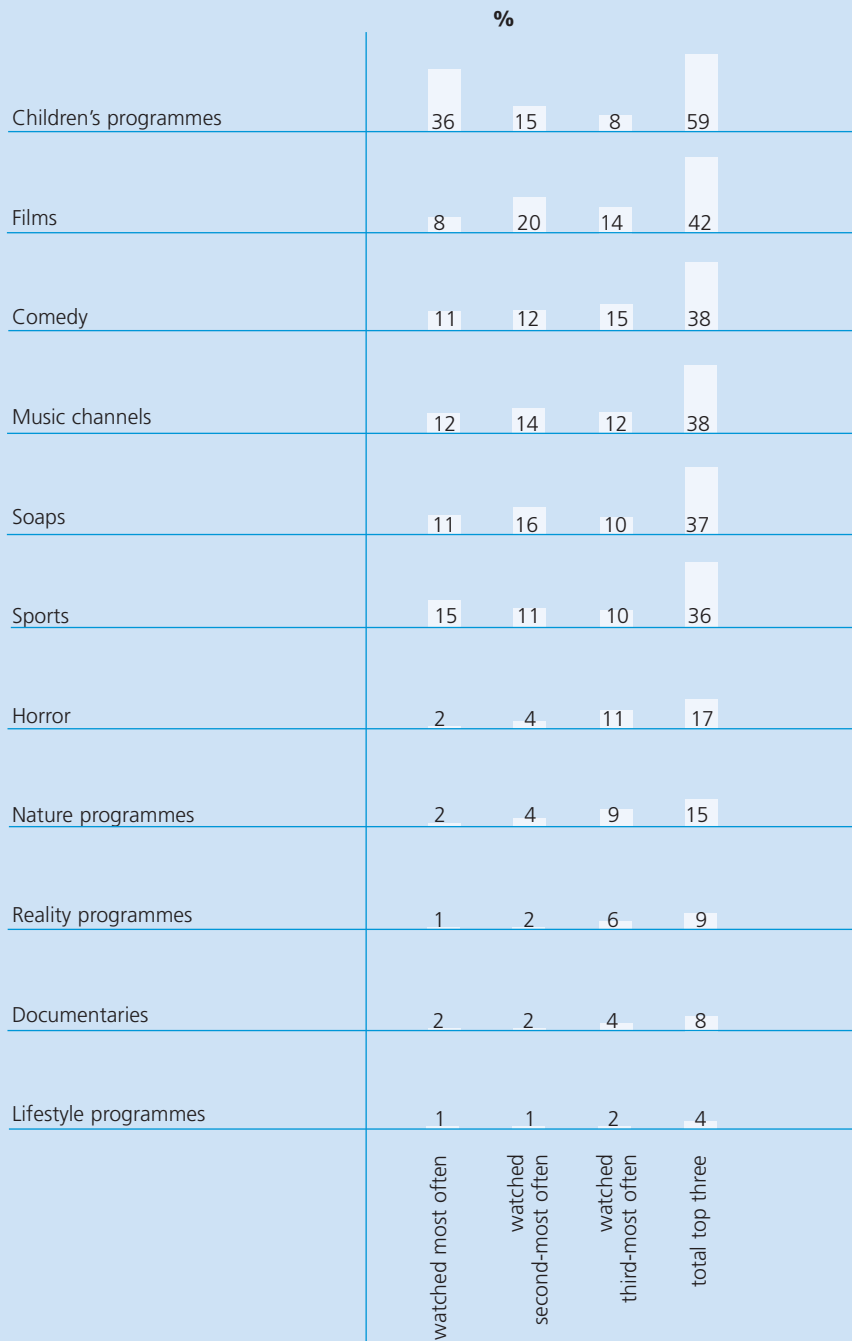
Table 5: Top three programmes, by total sample
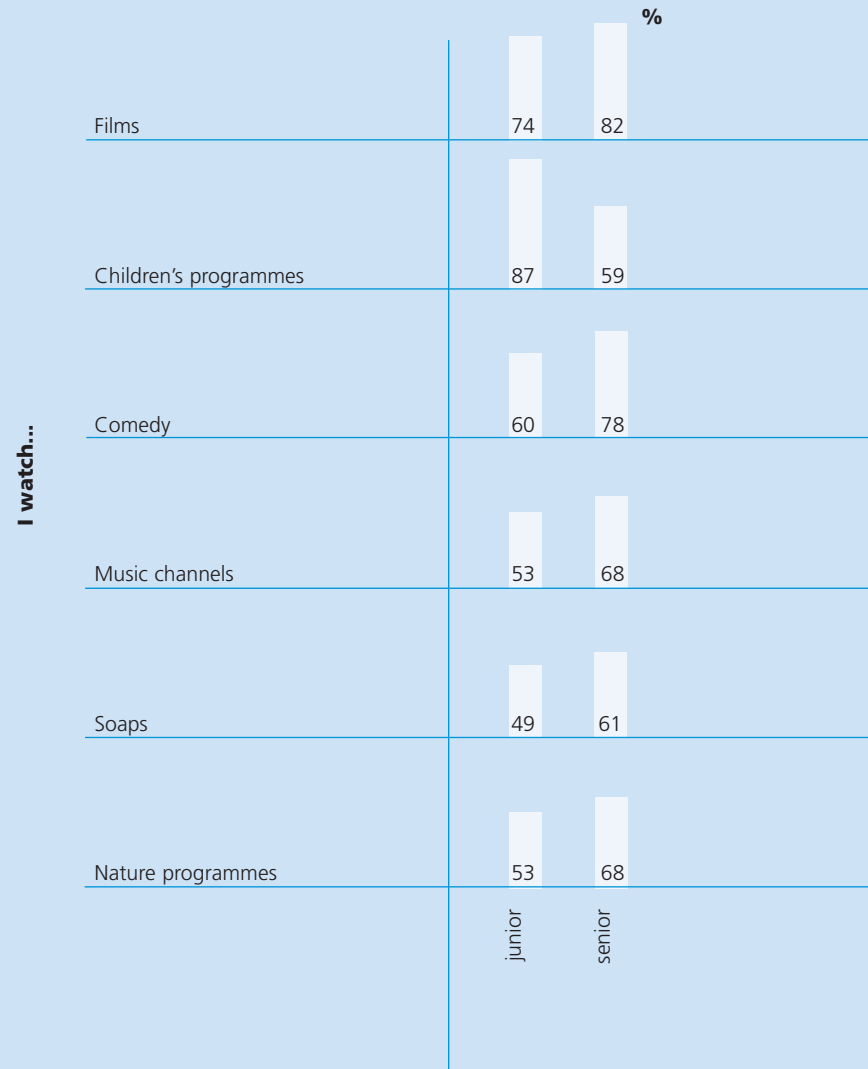
	watched most often	watched second-most often	watched third-most often	total top three
Children's programmes	36	15	8	59
Films	8	20	14	42
Comedy	11	12	15	38
Music channels	12	14	12	38
Soaps	11	16	10	37
Sports	15	11	10	36
Horror	2	4	11	17
Nature programmes	2	4	9	15
Reality programmes	1	2	6	9
Documentaries	2	2	4	8
Lifestyle programmes	1	1	2	4

Table 6: Types of programme watched, by age

I watch…

	junior	senior
Films	74	82
Children's programmes	87	59
Comedy	60	78
Music channels	53	68
Soaps	49	61
Nature programmes	53	68

Table 7: Types of programme watched, by sex

%

I watch...

	boys	girls
Children's programmes	65	79
Comedy	80	60
Music channels	54	68
Sports	73	41
Soaps	43	67
Horror	51	37
Reality programmes	27	40
Documentaries	28	20
Lifestyle programmes	15	22
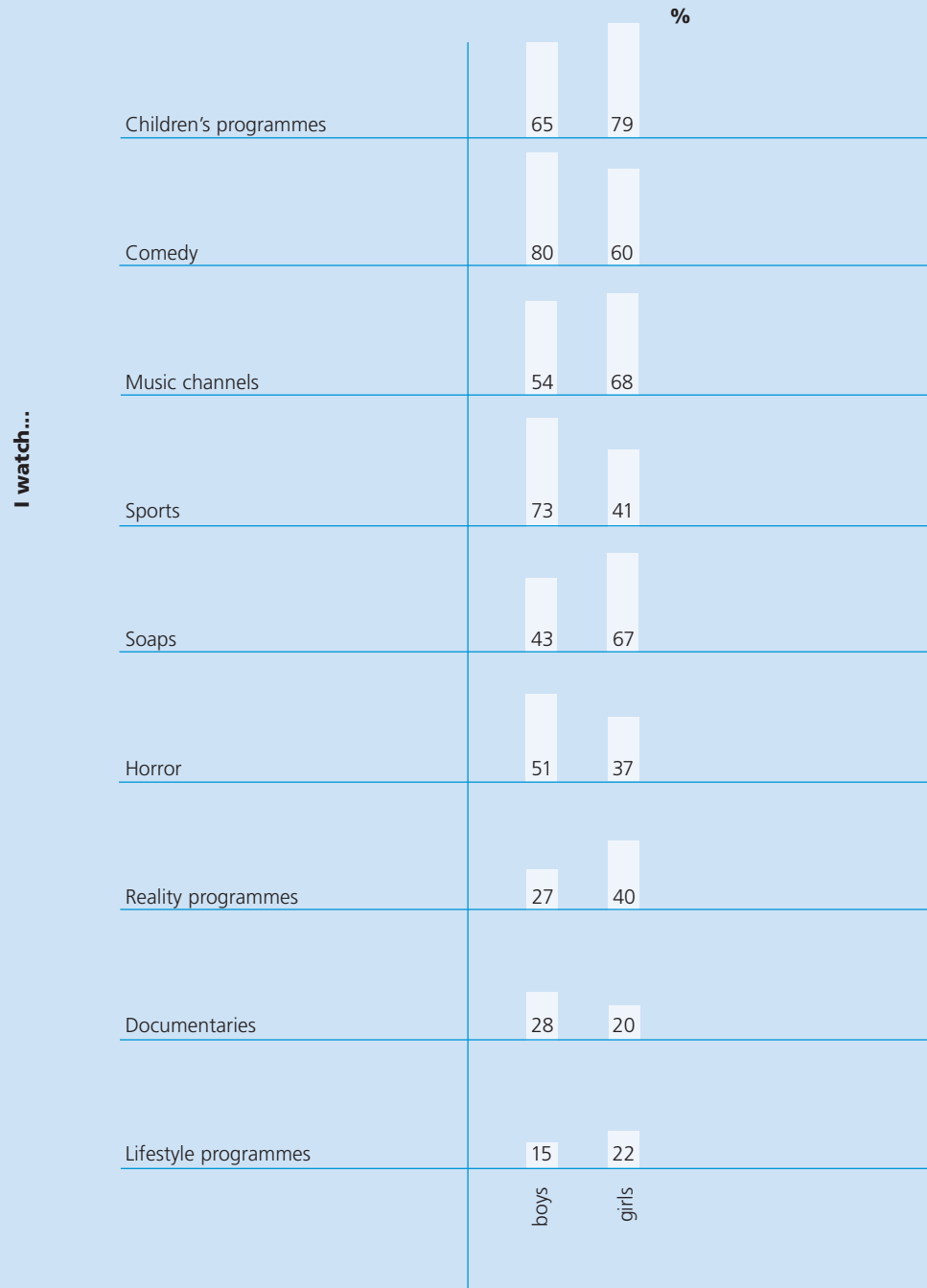
Table 8: Favourite programmes, by age

%

My top three programmes include...

	junior	senior
Children's programmes	76	44
Sports	36	35
Comedy	30	45
Music channels	31	45
Soaps	31	42
Films	43	42
Horror	19	14
Nature programmes	19	11
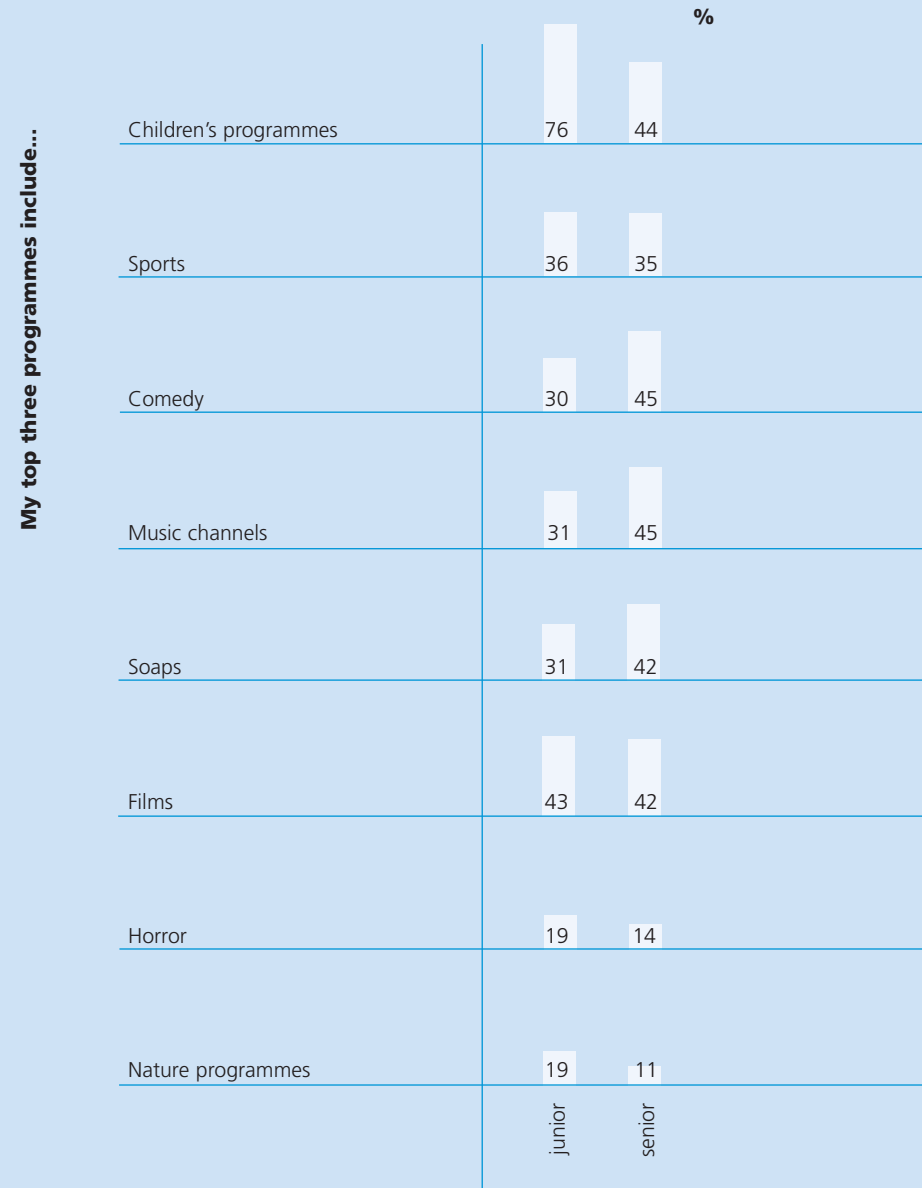
Table 9: Favourite programmes, by sex

%

My top three programmes include...

	boys	girls
Children's programmes	50	67
Sports	52	20
Comedy	50	26
Music channels	31	44
Soaps	25	48
Horror	20	13
Documentaries	9	6
Reality programmes	6	12
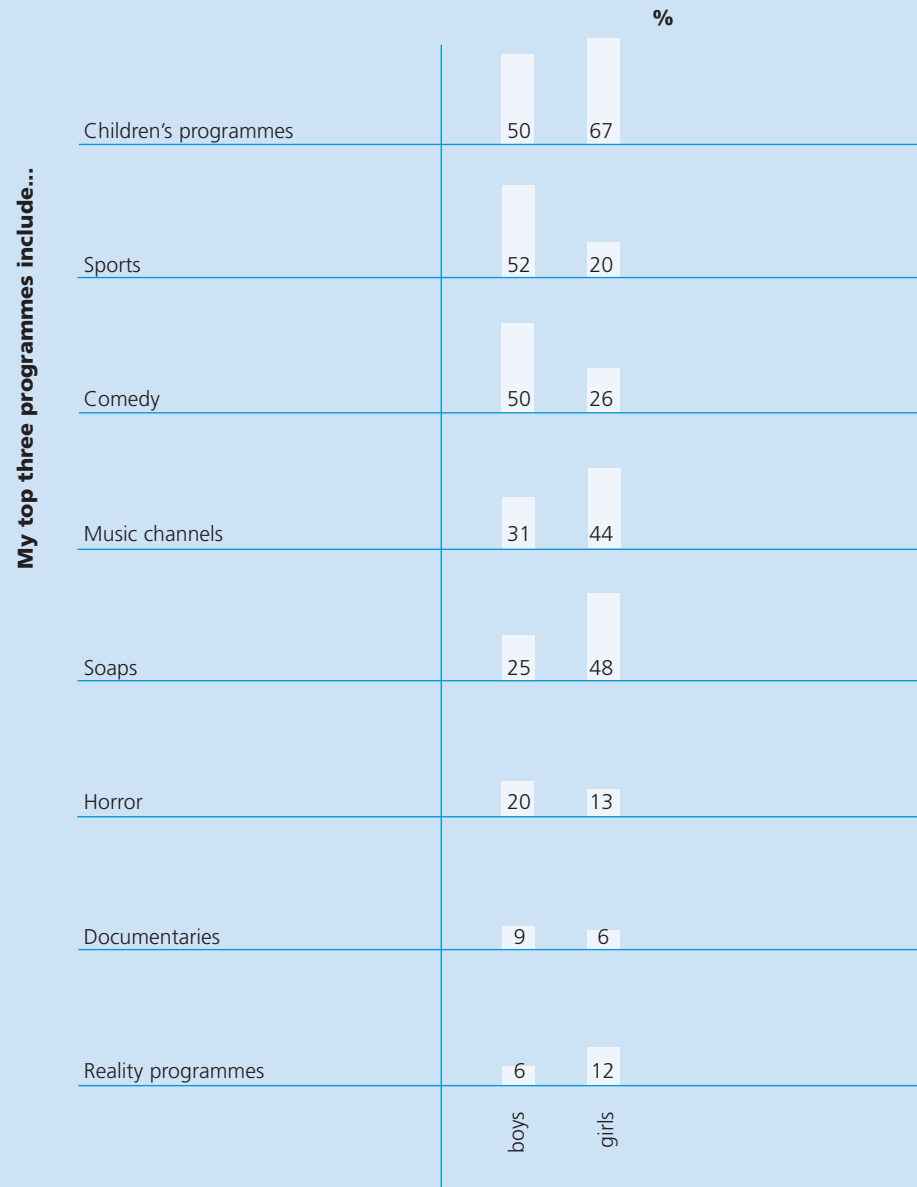
Table 10: Types of programme watched, by socio-economic group

%

I watch...

	affluent	deprived
Music channels	48	77
Children's programmes	78	65
Soaps	49	63
Horror	33	58
Nature programmes	41	19
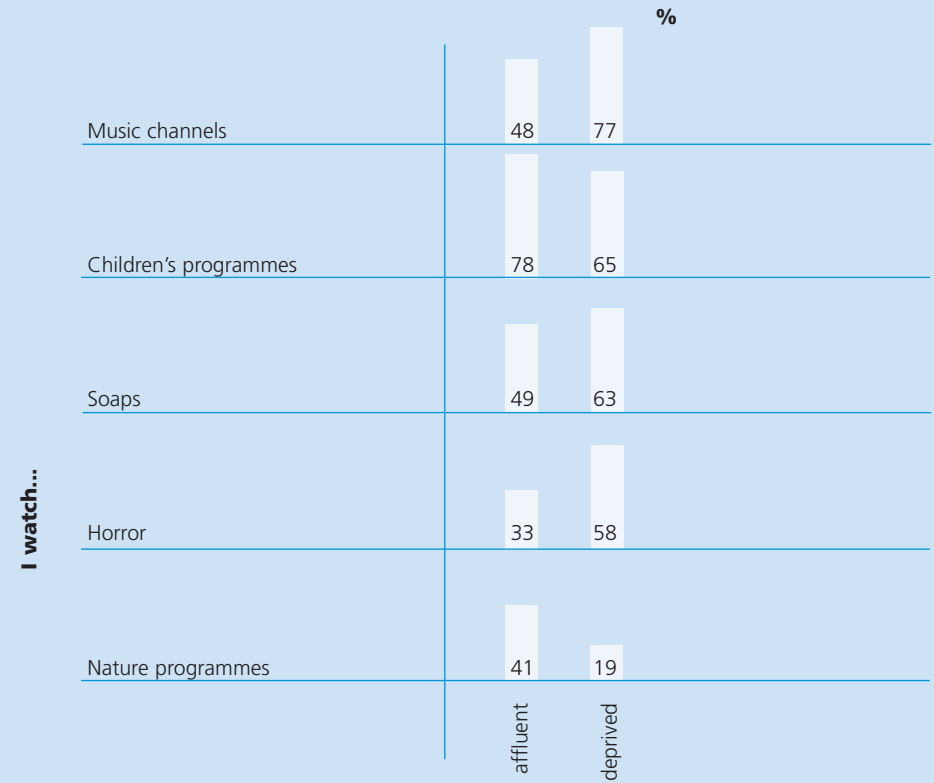
Table 11: Favourite programmes, by socio-economic group

My top three programmes include...

%

	affluent	deprived
Children's programmes	67	49
Sports	35	37
Comedy	38	27
Music TV	30	48
Soaps	33	42
Films	47	37
Horror	8	27
Nature Programmes	23	4
Documentaries	10	4
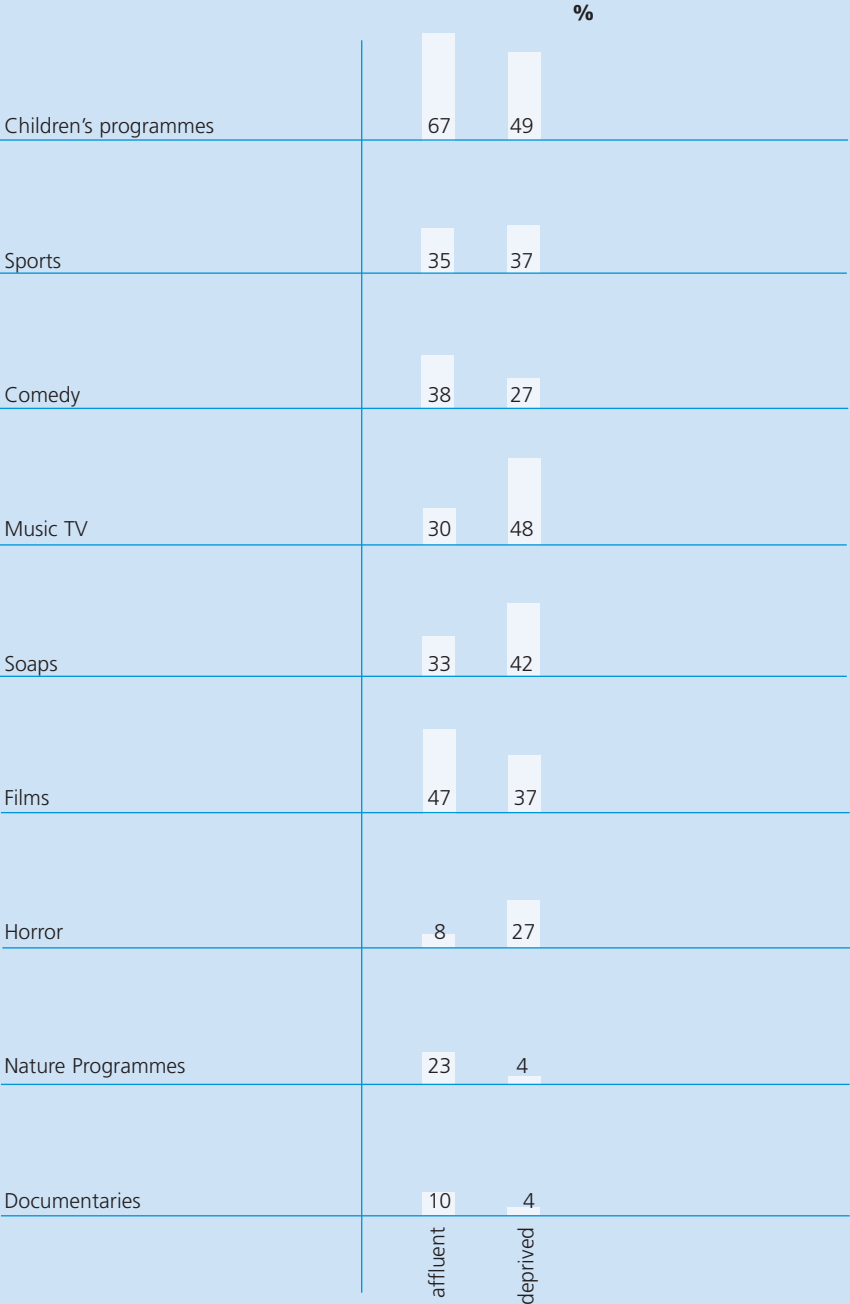
Table 12: Attitudes to adverts, by whole sample

	disagree	agree
	%	
I believe what they show in TV ads	70	30
I like TV adverts	77	23
I think TV adverts are great	87	14
When adverts are shown on TV, I feel like watching them	78	22
I think TV adverts are good	75	24
I think that TV adverts tell the truth	74	26
When adverts are shown on TV, I enjoy watching them	80	21

Table 13: Liking adverts, by age

	junior	senior
	%	
I like TV adverts	29	18
I think TV adverts are great	18	10
When adverts are shown on TV, I feel like watching them	28	17
I think TV adverts are good	30	19
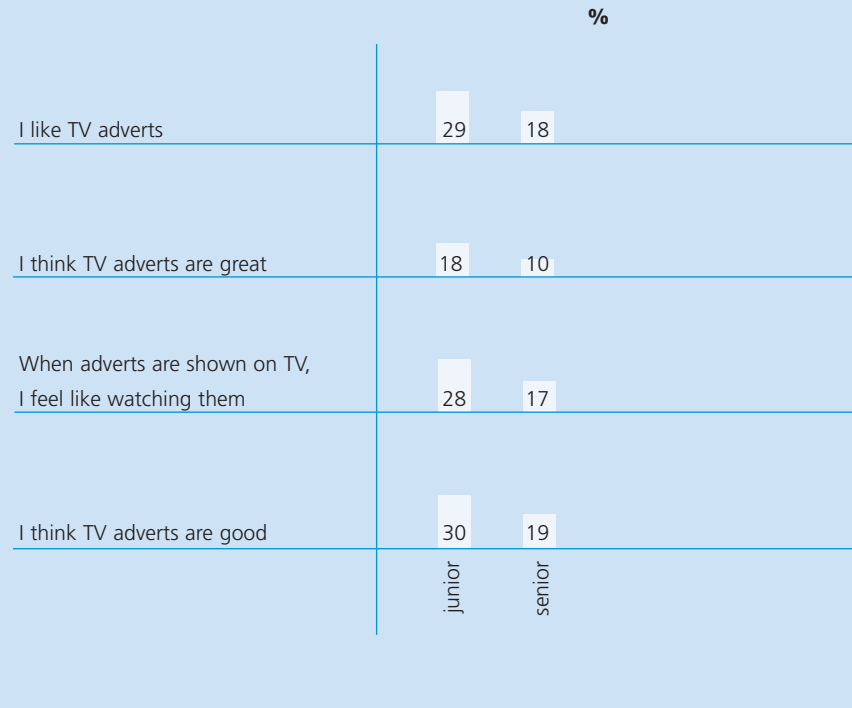
Table 14: Believing adverts, by socio-economic group

	affluent	deprived
	%	
I believe what they show in TV ads	20	41
I think that TV adverts tell the truth	18	35
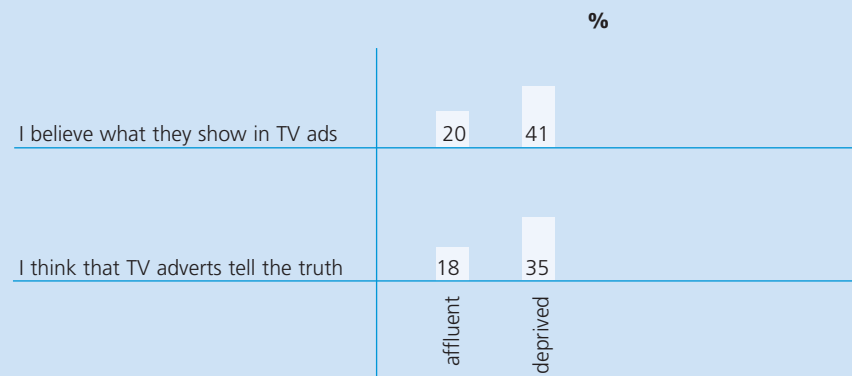
TV adverts

Taken as a whole, our sample of 9–13-year-olds do not like TV adverts and nor do they believe them. Three quarters or more dislike them and over 70 per cent do not think they tell the truth (Table 12).

In examining the correlation between scepticism and age we find that younger children are more enthusiastic about advertising than their older counterparts (Table 13). However, both junior and senior school children are equally likely to disbelieve its claims. This finding runs counter to much previous research.[21] There is no difference between the sexes in either liking or believing advertising.

The most dramatic difference in attitude to TV advertising is in response by socio-economic group. Despite not liking advertising, twice as many children in deprived areas believe what is shown in adverts and believe that adverts tell the truth (Table 14).

Summary of television use

It is clear that children across the board are not just watching programmes targeted at them. Less than half of 12–13 year olds list children's programmes in their top three, and even the 9–11 year olds are also watching a lot of other types of programmes.

It is also clear that debates on the effects of TV watching must be careful to distinguish between different behaviours displayed by the two sexes. While two thirds of girls cite children's programmes in their top three, only half of the boys do: they are just as likely to be watching sports or comedy.

A greater proportion of children in deprived areas say they believe TV advertising claims.

Part two: computer use

Over the past few years, the market research agency ChildWise has found a gradual and small decrease in the amount of TV children watch, and an increase in computer activity.[22] Ownership statistics for 5–16-year-olds are as follows:

- 90 per cent have a computer at home.
- 38 per cent have their own PC or laptop.
- 71 per cent have internet access.
- 20 per cent have on-line access in their own room.

As with our questions on TV viewing, we wanted to create a computer score to use in our correlations with materialism and wellbeing. We also sought differences in computer use by sub-group, particularly by socio-economic group, as this data does not seem to have been collected elsewhere.

Using computers

Using the same scoring system we used for TV watching, the overall computer score for our sample (28.62) was far lower than the overall TV score (40.69): for computer scores across the whole sample, see Table 15. We had specifically asked the children we surveyed not to include time spent on homework in their answers relating to computer use. It will be interesting to track changes in these relative figures over time.

As with TV, computer use levels were similar between the sexes and across age ranges but differed by socio-economic group. We found computer use to be much heavier in the deprived areas we surveyed. Twice as many children in the deprived areas say they have a computer in their room (Table 16) as well as the TV and DVD or video recorder mentioned earlier. As with TV, the internet is a highly commercialised medium, and the regulatory

environment relating to advertising and children is still evolving.

The groups from the deprived areas had an overall mean computer score of 30.9, compared with 26.9 for the affluent group. Among the most avid computer users (those who ticked the 'every day option'), five and nine times more deprived children say they use the computer during meals and five times more use the computer in their bedroom before going to sleep (Table 17).

Thus, while there have been reports of inequalities of access to computers across the UK[23] we see that in these very deprived areas at least, the children's reported computer activity is actually higher than that in affluent catchments.

Computer activities

Our survey showed, in line with ChildWise survey mentioned above, that children's primary use of the computer is to play games (mainly online games). Our research shows that they also use it to socialise and to look for information (Table 18).

More boys surf the web and play bought games, and more girls use e-mail. Other activities attract equal participation from both sexes (Table 20).

There is a tendency towards a greater number of senior school children surfing the web, and using e-mail and MSN (Table 21).

The types of computer-based activity enjoyed by the children in our survey do not vary much by socio-economic group. There were, however, some differences: 20 per cent more of the more deprived children use MSN and three times as many visit chat rooms (Table 20). Perhaps more significant is the variation in the extent to which these activities are pursued, with the deprived children overall using the home computer more than their affluent peers.

Table 22 shows children's preferred computer activities. Four times as many children from deprived areas put chat rooms in their top three computer activities. Just over half of the children from the affluent areas listed MSN in their top three. These children are also more likely than children from deprived areas to play bought games and surf the web.

These findings may be the result of differences in internet supervision in the two groups. Some parents may feel it is safer to allow children to play bought games than to allow them independent access to internet activity.

Summary of computer use

In our survey we have seen gender stereotypes borne out as girls prefer to chat and boys to look for information. We see e-mail and MSN as an older activity at the moment – but this may change over time. And we see that the group that is most likely to have private access to a computer is also most likely to be involved in chat rooms.

Overall summary: watching

Children's involvement with TV is still far greater than with the computer, though computer use is growing rapidly. With TV viewing decreasing only slowly it seems likely that, rather than computer use replacing TV watching, it will supplement it.

There seems to be a divergence in parental regimes in UK households, with children from different backgrounds accessing radically different content and in different quantities. Children living in deprived areas are heavier users of both TV and computers; and twice as many of them believe adverts as do their affluent counterparts. They prefer programmes made for an older audience and more of them visit chat rooms.

How will this relate to children's levels of wanting?

a: Weekdays

I use the computer...

	never	some days	most days	every day
...in the morning before school	79	17	2	2
...when I come home from school	14	44	26	16
...during my evening meal	77	14	5	4
...after my evening meal	24	49	19	8
...in bed before going to sleep	41	22	12	25

b: Saturdays

I use the computer...

	never	some	most	every
...in the morning	34	42	13	17
...during lunch	70	19	6	5
...in the afternoon	23	46	21	11
...during evening meal	79	13	4	5
...after evening meal	31	47	13	9
...after evening meal	74	13	5	8

Table 15: TV computer use across whole sample

a: Sundays

Every Sunday I use the computer...

	never	some	most	every
...in the morning	34	42	13	17
...during lunch	70	19	6	5
...in the afternoon	23	46	21	11
...during evening meal	79	13	4	5
...after evening meal	31	47	13	9
...after evening meal	74	13	5	8
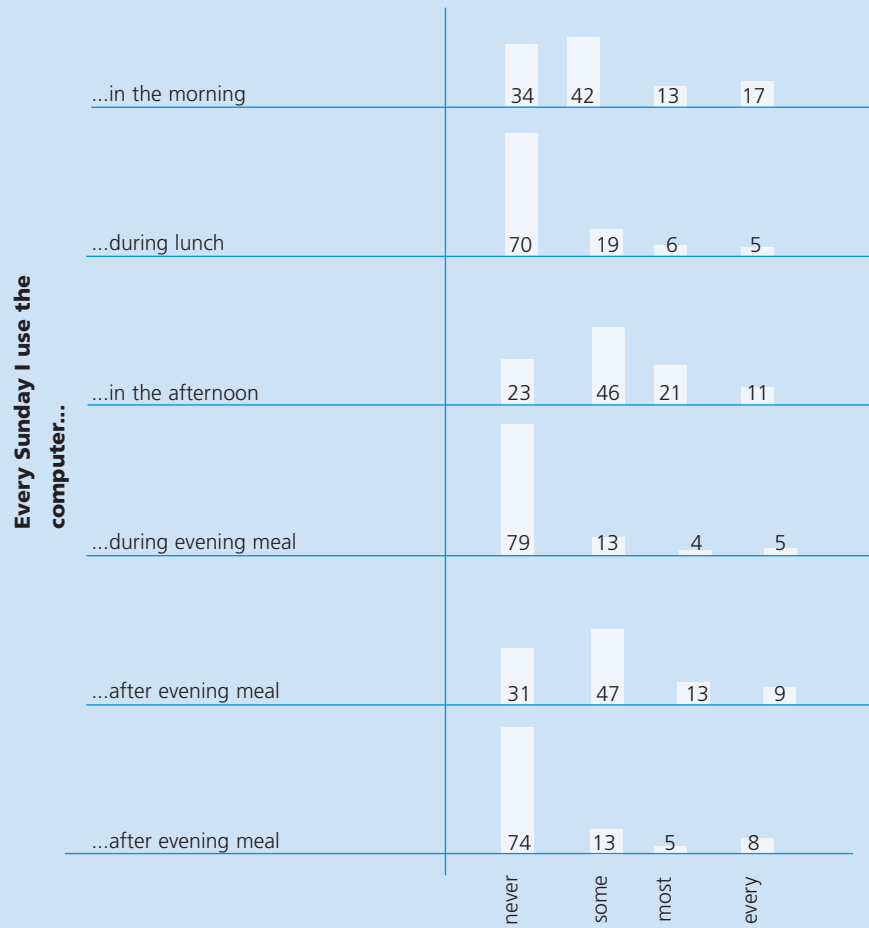
Table 16: Computer in bedroom, by socio-economic group

%

	affluent	deprived	all children
Computer in bedroom	30	62	44
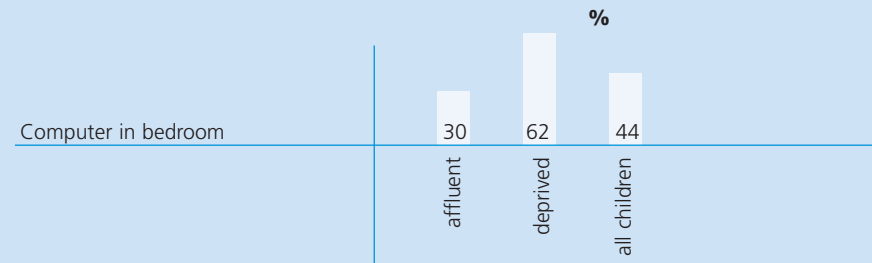
Table 17: Computer use, by socio-economic group: 'every weekday'

a: Weekdays

%

Every weekday I use the computer...

	affluent	deprived
...in the morning before school	1	4
...when I come home from school	9	23
...during my evening meal	1	7
...after my evening meal	4	14
...in bed before going to sleep	2	12

Table 17: Computer use, by socio-economic group: 'every Saturday'

b: Saturdays

%

Every Saturday I use the computer...

	affluent	deprived
...in the morning	6	16
...during lunch	1	10
...in the afternoon	6	17
...during my evening meal	1	9
...after my evening meal	5	15
...in bed before going to sleep	3	15

Table 17: Computer use, by socio-economic group: 'every Sunday'

c: Sundays

%

Every Sunday I use the computer...

	affluent	deprived
...in the morning	4	11
...during lunch	0	6
...in the afternoon	3	16
...during my evening meal	1	5
...after my evening meal	3	12
...in bed before going to sleep	2	10
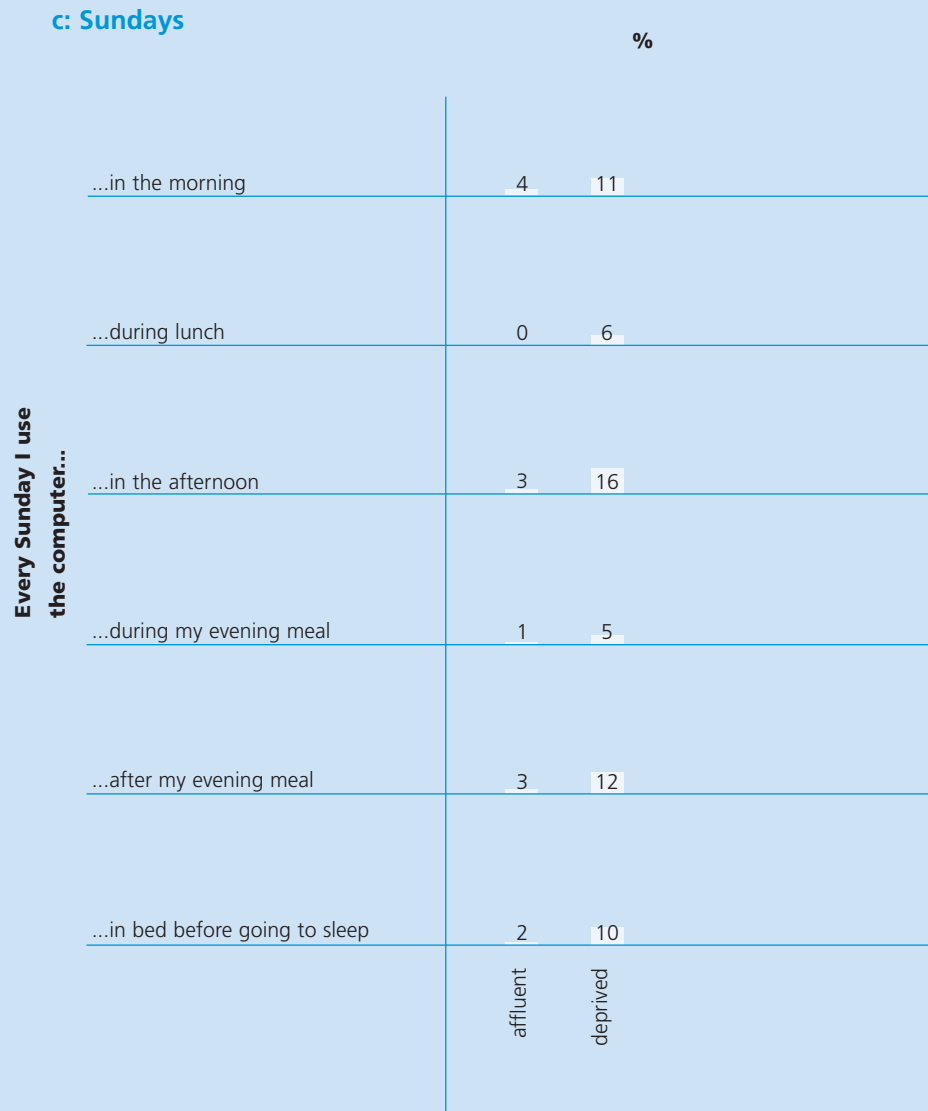
Table 18: Computer activities for whole sample

Computer activities	% of total sample
Play games on the internet	78
MSN	56
Surf the web	54
Email	46
Play bought games	43
Visit chat rooms	19
Shopping	14
Don't use it other than for homework	8
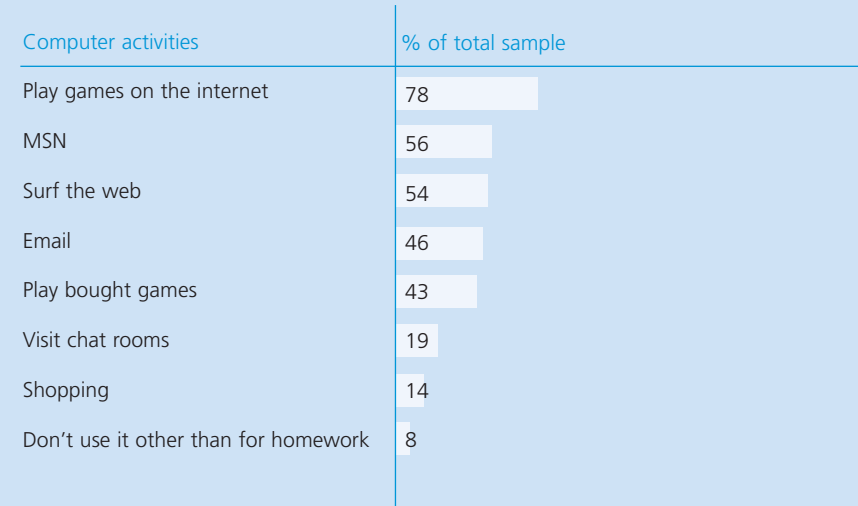
Table 19: Computer activities, by sex

%

	boys	girls
Surf the web	63	46
Play bought games	51	35
E-mail	39	52
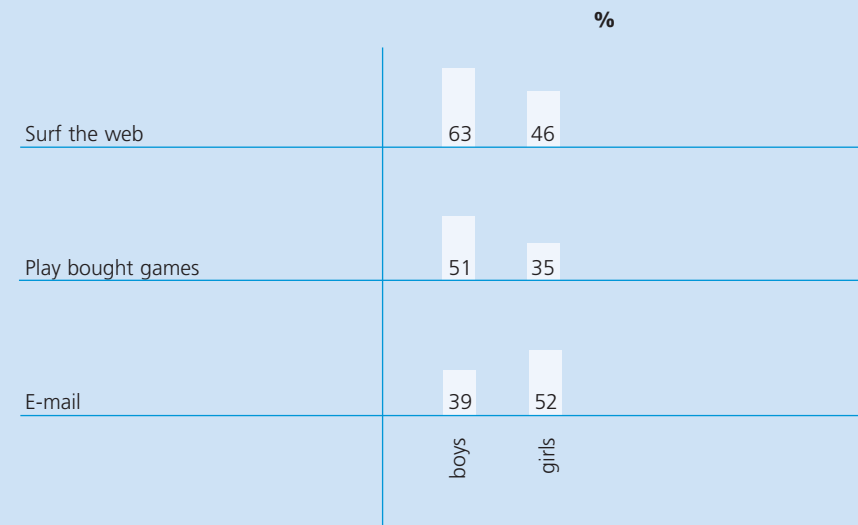
Table 20: Computer activities, by age

%

	junior	senior
Surf the web	44	63
Play bought games	37	53
E-mail	43	68
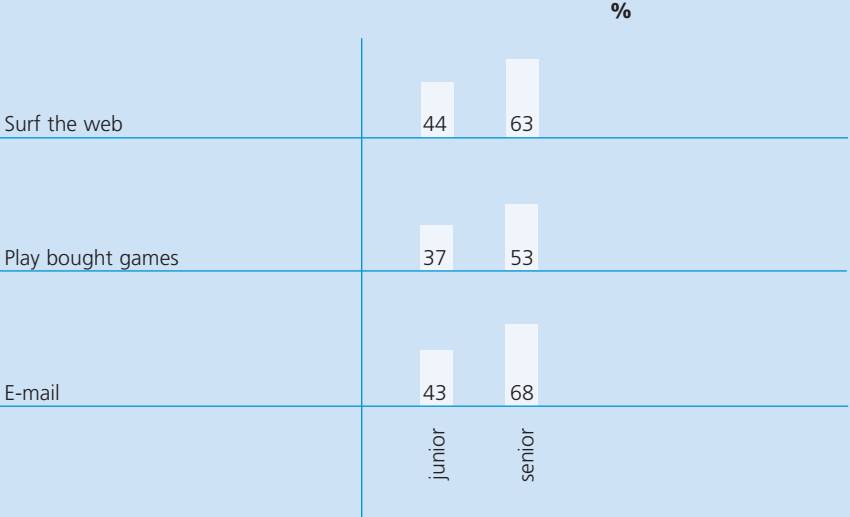
Table 22: Favourite computer activities, by socio-economic group

%

My top three computer activities include...

	affluent	deprived
MSN	51	68
Play bought games	47	34
Surf the web	63	57
Visit chat rooms	5	21

Table 21: Internet chatting and chat rooms, by socio-economic group

%

	affluent	deprived
Visit chat rooms	10	30
MSN	47	66
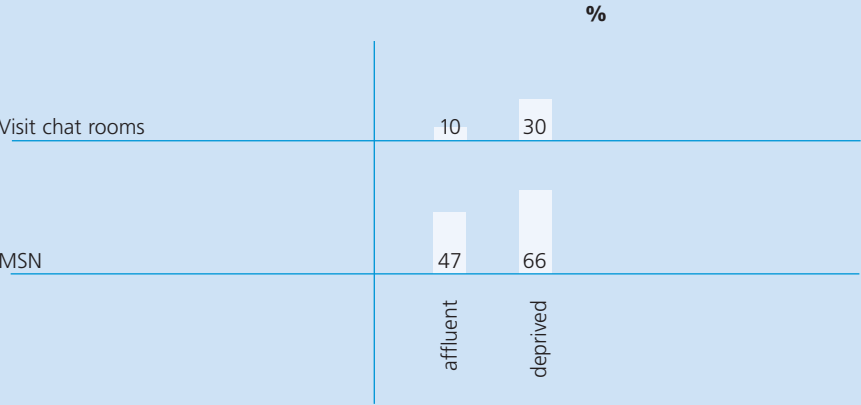
2 Wanting

Background

A substantial amount of empirical work has been done on the manifestations of children's orientation towards materialistic values and consumer culture. In a comprehensive review of the consumer socialisation of children, John[24] describes children as avid consumers who have been socialised into the role from a very early age, a conclusion that remains highly relevant. Indeed, it has recently been pointed out that advertising, brands, electronics, products, TV shows, even celebrities have become naturally embedded aspects of children's everyday discourses.[25]

It has been argued for many years that the consumption principles to which children are exposed on TV and the internet such as *you are what you wear/eat/ own* affect how children navigate the western consumer world.[26] Numerous studies have shown that material goods facilitate evaluation and comparisons of social position even in the minds of small children. Some researchers argue that children use material objects to make social comparisons in the same way that adults do.[27] Others emphasise how children use brands as symbols in their peer groups.[28] And it seems that children do not infer social status only in this way: they also emphasise loyalty to commercial brands,[29] struggle to avoid social sanctions based on dress codes and behaviours[30] and make statements of individuality based on clothing, piercings or hairstyle.[31]

Part one: defining materialism

If we are to produce robust evidence for or against a link between watching, wanting and wellbeing then we must have a clear idea of what we mean by 'wanting' – in other words 'materialism'. What exactly do we mean when we talk about 'materialism' as a concept or 'materialistic' as applied to an individual?

The concept of materialism stems from the observation that the way people think and feel about buying, owning and displaying material objects differs in intensity – and that the degree of intensity has a direct effect on behaviours and attitudes in every day life.[32] Since Veblen (1899–1925) and Simmel (1903–1971) talked about 'conspicuous consumption'[33], academics and commentators have tried to decide how to capture and define materialism.

There are two major schools of thought. The prolific and highly respected consumer behaviour expert Russell Belk[34] describes materialism as an individual attribute, based on a collection of personality traits (envy, non-generosity, possessiveness, preservation). This approach has been termed 'personality materialism'.[35] Within this tradition, research by Schroeder and Dugal in 1995[36] suggests that there is a continuum from highly materialistic, socially anxious and self-conscious individuals to individuals who exhibit identity security through self-understanding and low degrees of envy and need for social comparison.

Others have seen this reliance on enduring personality traits as too deterministic – not sensitive enough to explain the divergence of consumer behaviour in everyday life. This school of thought is represented by the works of

Marcia Richins[37] and Marvin Goldberg[38] among others, and is known as 'personal values materialism'.[39] From this perspective, materialism is seen as a personal value system that develops and changes according to an individual's life circumstances.

In Richin's materialism scale there are three aspects to materialism: happiness, success and centrality. The happiness dimension measures whether you believe that you need material possessions in order to be contented ('I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things'); the success dimension measures whether you judge people's achievements by their possessions ('I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, clothes'); and the centrality dimension whether the acquisition of material objects plays a central role in your life ('buying things gives me a lot of pleasure'). Thus the most materialistic individuals believe[40] that material goods and

status can lead to increased happiness, and reflect success.

The measurement of materialism in children poses very particular problems. Considering the heavy commercial attention directed at children by the corporate world, the argument[41] that material wealth has gained status for them as a life goal – alongside identity formation and personal happiness – is not surprising. Children are at risk of confusing genuine needs and superficial wants in consumer society.[42]

But do material objects have the same meaning for children that they have for adults? Work on understanding the role of brands in the everyday lives of children indicates that this may not be so.[43] When measuring materialism in children, can we use the same measurement instruments as for adults? This is an extremely hard question to answer, as only a handful of studies have ever examined

materialism in children and adolescents.[44]

Part two: youth materialism scale

Our survey deals with materialism in terms of personal values, as we aim to understand how different individual circumstances (age, sex, socio-economic group and particularly media influences) can directly affect levels of materialism. We cannot discount the fact that materialism might also be part of a person's personality, and that this will also contribute to differences between individuals. Thus any measure of the social construction of materialism will inevitably tell only part of the story.

If materialism is seen as a set of relatively fluid personal values, an absolute measure of materialism becomes rather slippery. This is particularly the case in our media-intensive society, where attempts to find new ways of making material objects appealing may ultimately create new psychological dimensions

to materialism beyond centrality, happiness and success.

Measurement of materialism has been dominated by the use of two complementary scales: the Materialism Scale, by Belk (1985), and the Material Values Scale, by Richins and Dawson (1992).[45] These are well-developed and tested materialism scales that have, critically, been used only on adult populations. Scales that have been developed specifically for children are less well-validated.

After considerable research and consultation we decided to use the youth materialism scale (YMS) developed specifically for children by Goldberg et al.[46] Designed to facilitate understanding of the development of materialism in children aged 9-13, this scale seemed the most appropriate for our research. The authors set out to combine the two main theoretical perspectives described above (personality materialism and

personal values materialism) into a practically testable measure of materialism that would reflect the thoughts and feelings of 9–13-year-old children. The YMS combines elements from unvalidated adaptations of the Belk and Richins scales to the child population, and takes into consideration the core features of another children's scale proposed by Moschis & Churchill in 1978.[47] Although the main theoretical underpinning of the YMS is arguably the personal values understanding of materialism, item wordings are also influenced by the affective components of the Belk tradition. The scale consists of ten items, which contribute to an overall materialism score. Various items relate to the happiness dimension, such as: 'I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself'; to the the success dimension, as in: 'I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes'; and to the centrality dimension: 'I have fun just thinking

of all the things I own'. It also includes some of Belk's personality traits such as possessiveness: 'I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself'. The full scale is shown in Table 23.

Table 23: Youth materialism scale: Goldberg et al. (2003)

	strongly disagree	disagree	agree	strongly agree
I'd rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else				
I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself				
I have fun just thinking of all the things I own				
I really enjoy going shopping				
I like to buy things my friends have				
When you grow up the more money you have the happier you are				
I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself				
I would love to be able to buy things that cost lots of money				
I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes				
The only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money				

The scoring system for the scale is as follows:

Strongly disagree =1   Disagree = 2   Agree = 3   Strongly agree = 4
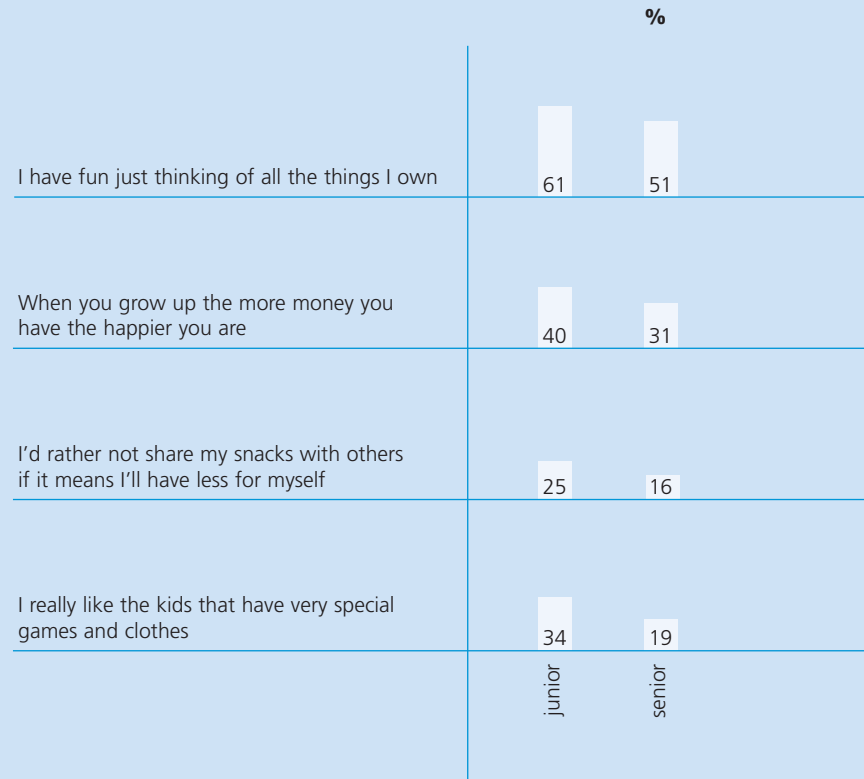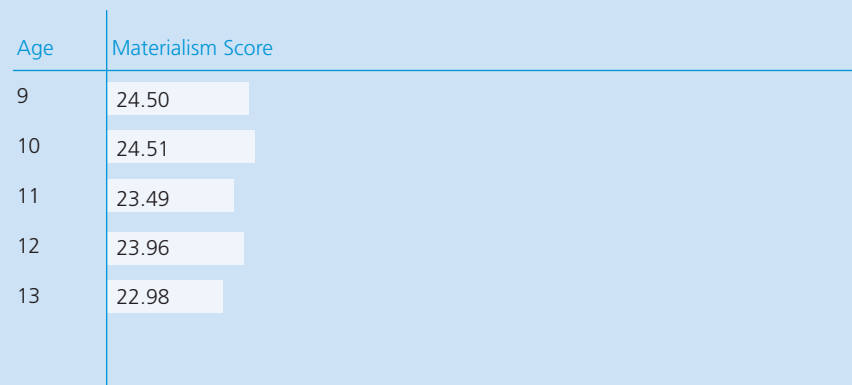
Materialism scores: whole sample

A high score indicates a high level of materialism. On a scale of 10-40 the average score for the whole sample in our study was 23.86 – almost four points above the mid-point. As this is the first time this scale has been used in the UK the figure is likely to be most useful as a benchmark for future studies. Table 24 shows the answers of the total sample to the ten items: the figures in brackets indicate the combined percentage of those strongly agreeing and agreeing; and those strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement.

For most scale items there is a relatively even split between agree and disagree; this would be expected on a scale measuring a continuum. However, there are some interesting insights to be gleaned from examining the individual questions. While only a third of the children agree that 'I'd rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else', almost twice that number (62 per cent) agree that 'I really enjoy going shopping'. Statistical tests of the data showed that the 'going shopping' statement did not correlate well with the other items on the scale. This may indicate that a stated preference for 'going shopping' does not really indicate a higher level of materialism but simply indicates enjoyment of a social activity, a way to hang out with friends. We removed the 'going shopping' item from our final model.

While the YMS performed well on statistical validity tests – we are confident that it is measuring 'materialism' as intended – these findings on particular scale items may be useful for developing future materialism scales relating to children. Future research may want to address what children really mean when they talk about 'shopping', whether 'success' and 'possessiveness' are dimensions of child materialism, and how we can control for socially desirable response bias (in other words, children giving the answers that they think the researcher wants to hear).

There may also be merit in UK researchers developing recent ideas from the USA around using collage and sorting tasks, in addition to paper and pencil tests. For example, in Chaplin and John's study of the role of self-concept in the development of materialism, children were asked to create a pictorial collage to represent their self-concept by selecting from a set of branded and non-branded images.[48] Levels of materialism were estimated through the proportion of brands used in the task.

Materialism scores by age

The main utility of scales such as the YMS is their ability to differentiate scores across groups of people. It is only very recently that researchers have begun to consider the development of materialism in children, let alone differences in materialism across age groups. Chaplin and John[49] have attempted to do this: looking at three ages of children (8/9, 11/12, 16/17), they conclude that materialism is highest in the middle group and falls away during later adolescence.[49] So far, no straightforward relationship between age and materialism has been established[50] and no studies comparing age and materialism have been published in the UK. Our findings may provide a valuable baseline from which future trends in childhood materialism can be measured and compared.

Our study also finds differing levels of materialism by age group, but gives different results to that conducted by Chaplin and John, as we found that the junior school children (age 9-11) in our sample are clearly more materialistic than senior school children (age 11-13).

Table 24: Responses to YMS items for whole sample

%

	strongly disagree	disagree	total disagree	agree	strongly agree	total agree
I'd rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else	14	53	(67)	26	8	(34)
I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself	12	31	(43)	31	26	(57)
I have fun just thinking of all the things I own	13	31	(44)	43	13	(56)
I really enjoy going shopping	20	19	(39)	36	26	(62)
I like to buy things my friends have	12	38	(50)	41	9	(50)
When you grow up the more money you have the happier you are	24	40	(64)	21	15	(36)
I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself	41	39	(80)	12	7	(19)
I would love to be able to buy things that cost lots of money	16	36	(52)	31	17	(48)
I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes	25	49	(74)	20	6	(26)
The only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money	16	38	(54)	24	22	(46)

The scoring system for the scale is as follows:

Strongly disagree =1   Disagree = 2   Agree = 3   Strongly agree = 4

Table 25: Materialism statements, by age

%

	junior	senior
I have fun just thinking of all the things I own	61	51
When you grow up the more money you have the happier you are	40	31
I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself	25	16
I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes	34	19

Table 26: Materialism score, by calendar age

Age	Materialism Score
9	24.50
10	24.51
11	23.49
12	23.96
13	22.98

The materialism score for junior school children (24.34) is significantly higher than that for senior school children (23.33).

Table 25 shows the statements where there is a significant difference in levels of agreement between the two age groups. The differences span all established dimensions of materialism: happiness, centrality, success and possessiveness.

Our findings may imply that older children have learnt that there are more important things in life than possessions, or that material possessions are more tantalising and attractive to younger children who, with smaller amounts of pocket money, have fewer personal means of acquiring such possessions. Qualitative research is needed to establish the causal dynamics of this finding.

Chaplin and John began their recent research[51] from the premise that

materialism is driven in part by a progressive, age-related acquisition of social–cognitive abilities. We decided to break the age groups in our survey down into discrete age by year. Table 26 shows the materialism scores by calendar age.

There is a decrease in materialism over the years – from 24.5 for 9-year-olds to 22.98 for 13-year-olds – but this progression is not completely clear-cut. While materialism does appear to be driven by age, it is also driven by the influence of peer group – and 10-year-olds might be in year 5 or 6, 11-year-olds in year 6 or 7, and 12-year-olds in year 7 or 8. Peer group has already been shown in some studies to be strongly related to some aspects of materialism,[52] and could usefully be added to future investigations into the materialistic orientation of UK youth.

Materialism scores by sex

A number of studies have examined how sex and materialism interact. Several have found that boys are more oriented towards materialistic values than girls.[53]

Our study did not support a bias towards boys or girls, in affluent or deprived areas, or across age groups: no sex differences on the materialism score reach statistical significance. As no theoretical framework exists for the specific reasons for assuming that boys should score higher than girls, the validity of existing empirical findings in the child and 'tween' population[54] stands unconfirmed in relation to British 9-13-year-olds.

Table 27 shows a pronounced difference between the sexes on some items, most notably attitudes to shopping. While 82 per cent of girls say they like to go shopping only 40 per cent of boys do. This may indicate a difference in leisure

preferences rather than in materialism per se.

Materialism scores by socio-economic group

If the link between sex and materialism remains uncertain, one of the most well-established results about materialism is that degree of economic deprivation seems to be closely associated with level of materialistic orientation.[55] In a number of studies children and adults living in areas of socio–economic deprivation have been identified as scoring particularly highly on materialism.[56]

Our study completely supports these findings. The mean materialism score for the deprived area (25.55) is significantly higher than that for the affluent area (22.47).

Table 28 shows that a significantly higher percentage of children from the deprived areas agree with every

single one of the ten materialism statements. Apart, that is, from the statement 'I really enjoy going shopping', which appears to be driven primarily by sex. Around half of children from deprived areas would 'rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else', and believe that 'when you grow up, the more money you have the happier you are'; less than a quarter of children in affluent areas feel the same. And less than a third of children in affluent areas believe that 'the only job I want when I grow up is one that gets me lots of money'; over two-thirds of the children in deprived areas do.

If we look at age differences in the two socio-economic categories we find that the age difference holds in the deprived areas: the mean materialism scores are 27.2 for juniors and 24.1 for seniors. However, this difference is not statistically significant in affluent areas, suggesting that the socio-

economic driver is stronger than age difference. As mentioned above, the strength of this antecedent is one of the most consistent findings in materialism research.[57]

There are two major theories that address differences in levels of materialism: the 'attainment hypothesis' and the 'deprivation hypothesis'.

The deprivation hypothesis rests squarely on the assumption that 'relative deprivation can also lead to higher than average priority for certain goals.'[58] Thus, where there is little possibility of meeting them satisfactorily, physical and psychological needs can become more salient. In other words, the more unobtainable something is, the more desirable it appears. In our study, children with less money and fewer material possessions desire more, with greater urgency.

The attainment hypothesis assumes that life values and achieved goals

'reflect a history of purposive activity toward some held values'.[59] In this model the level of materialism varies in relation to how important possessions and money are as a personal priority, and accumulation of material possessions reflects a personal value system which could apply to either socio-economic category. Indeed, while a greater proportion of children in the deprived areas wanted more money to buy more things, we also found that more of them actually have TVs and computers in their bedrooms.

Although neither the deprivation nor the attainment hypotheses are socio-economically bounded, it is likely that personal value systems are propagated directly within family structures and social communities. Marks, for example, noted that materialist values are influenced by parental socialisation and are transmitted directly from parent to child.[60] Values may thus be linked to socio-economic group inasmuch as

they are propagated and nurtured through people's daily social contacts.

Applied to our results, the attainment hypothesis could possibly account for the relatively higher material orientation in the deprived area, as a result of a social value system emphasising labour and ownership (or 'getting ahead'), whereas the deprivation hypothesis could explain the higher level of materialism as a result of overemphasising acquisition, ownership, and display of material goods in the absence of actual financial prosperity.

These remain tentative suggestions: there is no definitive evidence for whether the deprivation hypothesis or the attainment hypothesis provides a better explanation of differences in levels of materialism between socio-economic groups.

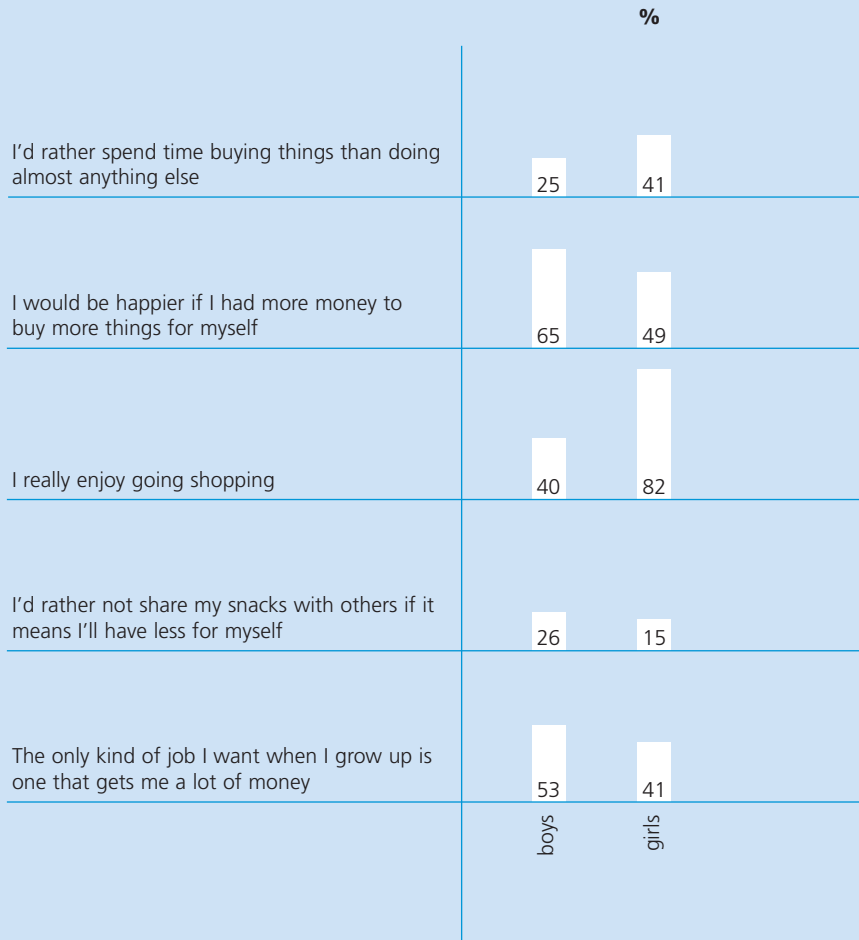## Table 27: Materialism statements, by sex

%

Statement	boys	girls
I'd rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else	25	41
I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself	65	49
I really enjoy going shopping	40	82
I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself	26	15
The only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money	53	41

Table 28: Materialism by, socio-economic group

%

Statement	affluent	deprived
I'd rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else	23	47
I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself	50	66
I have fun just thinking of all the things I own	50	62
I like to buy things my friends have	44	56
When you grow up the more money you have the happier you are	23	51
I'd rather not share my snacks with others if it means I'll have less for myself	17	25
I would love to be able to buy things that cost lots of money	43	55
I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes	19	34
The only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money	28	69

Overall summary: wanting

Materialism is not straightforward to define or measure, particularly in the case of children.

The youth materialism scale appears to be a good measurement instrument for childhood materialism. Future work on children's materialism metrics might include developing an understanding the role of socially desirable response bias (children giving answers they think the researcher wants to hear), and experimenting with qualitative techniques such as drawing, collages and sorting tasks.

Little research has been done on the age-stage progression and development of materialism in children. Somewhat at odds with Chaplin and John,[61] the younger children in our sample were more materialistic than the older children. It appears from our results that materialistic orientation is based not solely on the development of social-

cognitive skills but also on peer interaction.

Contrary to much previous research, we did not find that boys were more materialistic than girls.

In line with previous research we found that children from the deprived areas we surveyed were much more materialistic than those from the affluent areas. It seems that this can in part be explained by the deprivation hypothesis (those who have less want more) and in part by the attainment hypothesis (acquiring money and possessions is a life goal sanctioned and promoted within a specific community).

There is of course an alternative possibility. Just as we found that the children from the deprived areas are exposed to significantly higher levels of media use, so we have reported in this paper that these children display significantly more materialistic values than their affluent counterparts. Are these two facts in

themselves related? Is materialism affected not so much by what you can't have, or by community values, but by what you are being constantly offered by the media?

In Chapter Four we build a model linking media, materialism and wellbeing. Before that, we turn our attention to our measure of wellbeing.

3 Wellbeing

Background

Only recently have issues relating to consumer culture and materialism gone beyond sociology, consumer behaviour, anthropology and economics to become a focus for psychologists and mental health researchers. Thus, trying to make the link between materialism and psychological wellbeing is a relatively new venture. Since the turn of this century Luthar and colleagues have published consumer related findings from a psychological perspective,[62] and in 2003 a comprehensive compilation on psychology and consumer culture was published.[63] However, a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological dynamics of consumer culture has yet to be developed.[64]

There is a widely accepted assumption in some areas of consumer research that focusing on materialistic values and possessions has a negative impact on psychological wellbeing.[65] This general notion continues to fuel societal unease, particularly given the highly creative strategies of multi-national consumer goods enterprises. Many companies now sharply target the 9-13 age group, urging them to buy into the commercial image of obtaining happiness through material possessions – at the expense, some would argue,[66] of life satisfaction and psychological wellbeing.

Part one: defining wellbeing

The negative impact of materialism on psychological wellbeing is beginning to be confirmed in recent studies among older adolescent, student and adult populations.[67] This dynamic can be seen as the result of three parallel processes:[68] first, an escalation of wants created by access to consumer culture is enforced by the societal nurture of materialistic orientation; second, a perceived gap between current life status and some aspirational level may lead people with a high materialistic orientation to develop more unrealistic expectations than their lower-scoring counterparts, causing dissatisfaction; third, an excessive focus on materialistic values may ultimately replace interpersonal contact and social interaction with objects and material goods.

Burroughs, Rindfleisch and Denton express part of this latter social process as 'conflicting values', noting that materialistic attitudes at odds with family or religious values can cause a psychological tension, which is in turn associated with reduced wellbeing.[69]

This relationship of adult wellbeing to materialism seems to be understood in two ways. Firstly it is conceptualised as a dissatisfaction with life, caused by a mismatch between expectation and achievement; secondly it is seen as manifested in impaired social relationships, as obsession with objects leads to an absence of the comfort of others or tensions in conflicting value systems.

Can we consider the childhood consequences of materialism as also bound up with life dissatisfaction and impaired social functioning? Or should the consequences of childhood materialism be conceived in some other way?

In recent years a number of different theoretical and empirical measures have been developed in search of a better understanding of the dynamics of children, consumer culture and wellbeing.[70] Childhood psychological wellbeing has been studied as a qualitative parent assessment of child happiness;[71] on scales measuring life satisfaction[72] and life dissatisfaction;[73] and as a selection of measures from standardised psychologists' scales screening for anxiety, depression and psychosomatic symptoms.[74]

It has been shown that when children experience difficulty and

negativity they tend to internalise these events and often blame themselves.[75] Thus, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with external life circumstances may not be the best measure of children's wellbeing in relation to materialism. A number of studies have used questionnaires developed for diagnosing childhood internalising disorders such as depression, anxiety and psychosomatic indicators.[76] These scales have been designed primarily to identify children at risk from psychopathological illnesses, and in relation to assessment of mental health disorders these scales are used in conjunction with other diagnostic techniques – such as face-to-face interviews. Thus, data collected in this way may not gauge the overall wellbeing of the general population of children.

Some of the most recent work on materialism and mental health in children has begun to explore the contribution of parent-child conflict and opinions of parents to the association between materialism and wellbeing.[77] For example, Flouri considered the effects of parents arguing with each other and the influence of how involved parents are in bringing up their children,[78] while Schor considered what children think of their parents.[79]

We speculate that focusing on what makes children thrive in everyday life would provide a fruitful framework for understanding the materialism-wellbeing interaction. After all, a happy child exhibiting self-respect and respect for others can most often be characterised as socially and psychologically well-functioning. On the contrary, a child who does not like him- or herself, argues a lot with family members and disregards parents in some way or other cannot be said to exhibit positive psychological wellbeing. Rather, he or she would tend to feel miserable, fall out with parents, peers and teachers, thereby reinforcing a vicious circle leading to low self-esteem.

It is extremely important to note that, worldwide, only a very limited amount of research has been conducted on the effects of materialism on childhood and adolescent wellbeing, and that those empirical studies that do exist have been conducted from divergent perspectives. The empirical results of the direct negative effects on children of materialism are tentative, inconclusive and contradictory.[80] This leaves the area of consumer psychology with a large knowledge gap about whether there can be said to be a direct negative association between children's degree of materialistic orientation and their psychological wellbeing – and, indeed, on how best to measure wellbeing itself.

Our work aims simply to provide one robust empirical piece to a large and complex jigsaw.

Part two: measures of wellbeing:

Self-esteem and family relationships

After extensive research and consultation we decided to use the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES),[81] together with measures of parent–child conflict and overall attitudes towards parents, as our measures of children's wellbeing.

Self-esteem

The RSES measures what is known as 'global self-esteem'. Understood as a basic human need, global self-esteem is characterised by an individual motivation to protect and enhance the feeling of self-worth,[82] which is an important element in psychological stability. It appears to be both an accurate predictor and a reliable consequence of mental health.

The dynamics of self-esteem appear to be as follows. An important risk factor for the development of

reduced wellbeing is the 'hopelessness' component. It has been noted that children who adopt an attitude of not caring, following the crowd, and attributing events to luck or fate often have a pronounced sense of hopelessness.[83] They gradually come to expect failure and assume that they are less capable in all areas of life (learned-helplessness), resulting in low self-esteem, which colours all areas of their lives. It has been argued that this, in turn, renders these children prone to depression.[84] Following the feelings of general hopelessness and worthlessness developed during childhood, individuals can begin to develop negative thought patterns such as 'I never succeed anyway', or 'I won't be able to do it'. Impaired global self-esteem persisting into adolescence and adulthood causes an increased vulnerability to future depressive episodes.[85]

The RSES is the most widely used measure of global self-esteem. This is partly because of its consistent reliability over the years and partly because of the ease of administration: there are only ten simple items on the scale. Moreover, the scale has recently been validated in a 53-country study,[86] giving us confidence that this is a reliable and valid measure of psychological wellbeing. The full scale is shown in Table 29.

It should be noted that we slightly altered the wording of two questions as the children in our pilot study found them hard to understand. The original wording of 'I feel that I'm a person of value, at least as valuable as others' is 'I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others'. 'I feel good about myself' originally read 'I take a positive attitude toward myself'.

The scale scored half of the answers as follows: one point for 'strongly disagree', two points for 'disagree', three points for 'agree' and four points for 'strongly agree'.

Five of the questions are negatively worded:

1. At times I think I am no good at all.

2. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

3. I certainly feel useless at times.

4. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

5. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

For these items, the scoring was reversed, so that, for example, 'strongly agree' scored one, while 'strongly disagree' scored four.

Scores can thus range from 10 (all ones) to 40 (all fours) with a midpoint of 25.

Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem.

Family relationships

We have noted two explanations for why materialism should be associated with reduced wellbeing. The first is that attaching importance to material objects may create a gap between aspiration and attainment, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction. The second postulates that an excessive attachment to things impairs interpersonal relations. This may be the result of a tension between material values and family values, or it may be a consequence of the removal of the comfort of others as objects replace people in importance. The second theory has received relatively less attention in previous research, so we pursued it as we continued to build our hypothesis.

Regardless of socio-economic affiliation, children grow up experiencing stressors such as parental workload, financial disagreements and family disputes. Usually, as long as some form of

stability and emotional care is found within a family, 9–13-year-olds develop compensatory skills and adhere to normal child development and psychological wellbeing. In the absence of a healthy family environment, or in families where a child perceives physical, emotional and social support to be lacking, self-esteem is not easily maintained and the psychological wellbeing of the child can be compromised.

We did not talk to any parents in our research but we did ask children about the frequency of arguments between themselves and their parents. We asked the children:

1. 'Do you and your parents disagree about how much time you spend watching TV?'

2. 'Do you and your parents disagree about how much time you spend using the computer for things other than homework?'

3. 'Do you and your parents disagree about things in general?'

There were four possible answers: 'never', 'some days', 'most days' and 'every day' (scored one to four respectively). We added the scores from each of the questions to give a parent-child conflict score. We were interested to see if high levels of materialism were associated with high frequency of parent-child conflict.

While a recent Dutch study considered the role of parent-child conflict,[87] Juliet Schor proposes a slightly different angle.[88] She and other campaigners[89] for less commercialism in the lives of children suggest that the youth culture propagated in the mass media in general, and by advertisers of children's products in particular, drives a wedge between parents and their children:

'It's important to recognise the nature of the corporate message: kids and products are aligned together in a really great, fun place, while parents, teachers, and other adults inhabit an oppressive, drab, and

joyless world. The lesson to kids is that it's the product, not your parent who's really on your side.'[90]

To explore the applicability of this model to UK children we collected the children's views on both their mothers and their fathers with the following questions:

1. 'S/he is not at all cool'.

2. 'S/he doesn't understand what kids need to have these days'.

3. 'S/he is boring'.

4. 'S/he is not too much fun to be around'.

A four-point scale with the options 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree' gave scores of one to four respectively. This allowed total scores of between four and 16 for both mothers and fathers.

We therefore have three measures of childhood wellbeing in our research: self-esteem, parent-child conflict and attitude to parents.

Self-esteem scores for whole sample

The mean score for the whole sample is 28.79, which lies almost four points above the mid-point. As with the materialism scores, this is relatively meaningless on its own as there have been no comparable UK studies of this age group. A version of the RSES was used by Flouri in a study of over 2,000 UK senior school pupils.[91] Flouri's version used seven questions and a five-point response scale. This means that the scores are not directly comparable.

Table 30 shows the responses from our survey to each of the ten items in the RSES. It can be seen that nearly nine in ten children (87 per cent) agree or strongly agree that 'I have a number of good qualities' and over eight in ten agree or strongly agree that 'I am able to do things as well as most people' and 'I feel good about myself'. A similar number (80 per cent) disagree or

Table 29: Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES)

	strongly disagree	disagree	total disagree	agree	strongly agree	total agree
On the whole I am satisfied with myself						
I feel that I have a number of good qualities						
I am able to do things as well as most people						
I am able to do things as well as most people						
I feel good about myself						

The scoring system for above questions is as follows:
Strongly disagree =1   Disagree = 2   Agree = 3   Strongly agree = 4

	strongly disagree	disagree	total disagree	agree	strongly agree	total agree
At times I think I am no good at all						
I feel I do not have much to be proud of						
I certainly feel useless at times						
I wish I could have more respect for myself						
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure						

The scoring system for the above questions is as follows:
Strongly disagree = 4   Disagree = 3   Agree = 2   Strongly agree = 1

Table 30: Responses to RSES for whole sample

% (rounded up)

	strongly disagree	disagree	total disagree	agree	strongly agree	total agree
On the whole I am satisfied with myself	5	19	(24)	60	17	(77)
I feel that I have a number of good qualities	2	11	(13)	63	24	(87)
I am able to do things as well as most people	3	15	(18)	62	20	(82)
I feel that I'm a person of value, at least as valuable as others	7	21	(28)	56	16	(72)
I feel good about myself	4	13	(17)	49	34	(83)

The scoring system for the above questions is as follows:
Strongly disagree =1   Disagree = 2   Agree = 3   Strongly agree = 4

	strongly disagree	disagree	total disagree	agree	strongly agree	total agree
At times I think I am no good at all	16	37	(53)	40	7	(47)
I feel I do not have much to be proud of	30	47	(77)	18	6	(24)
I certainly feel useless at times	21	31	(52)	38	9	(47)
I wish I could have more respect for myself	11	36	(47)	39	15	(54)
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	41	39	(80)	16	5	(21)
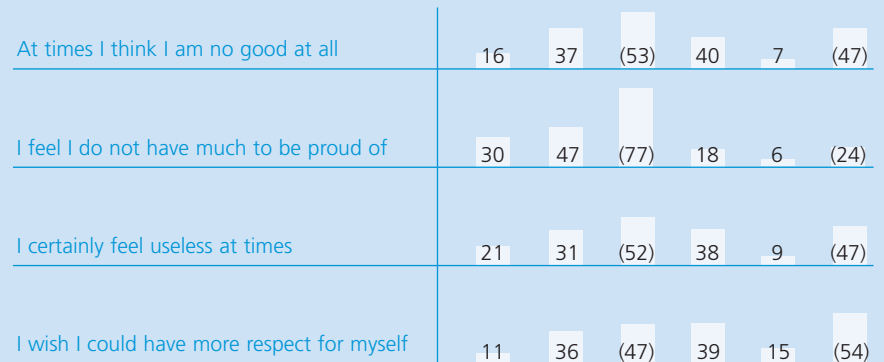
The scoring system for the above questions is as follows:
Strongly disagree = 4   Disagree = 3   Agree = 2   Strongly agree = 1

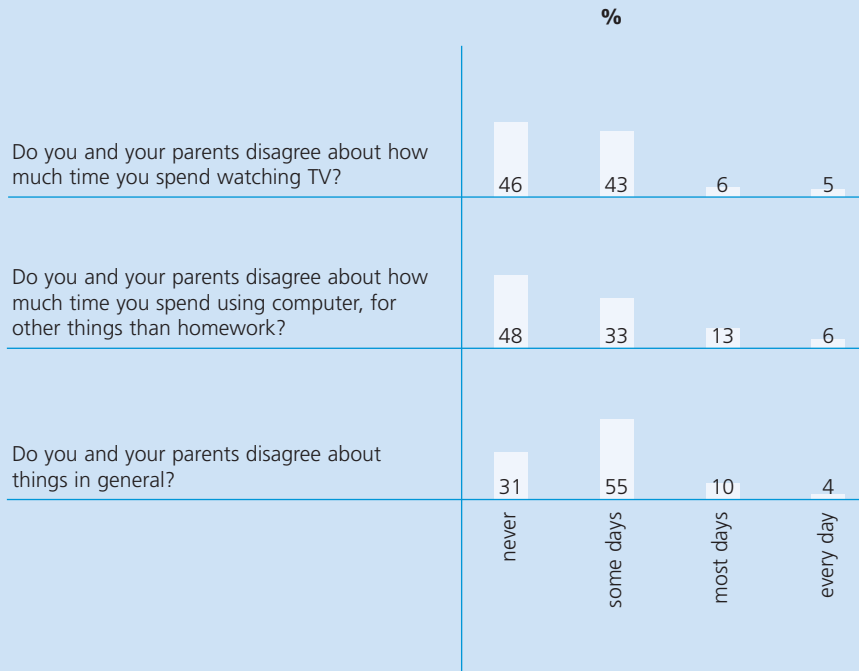## Table 31: Frequency of arguments for whole sample

%

	never	some days	most days	every day
Do you and your parents disagree about how much time you spend watching TV?	46	43	6	5
Do you and your parents disagree about how much time you spend using computer, for other things than homework?	48	33	13	6
Do you and your parents disagree about things in general?	31	55	10	4

Table 32: Attitude to parents for whole sample

%

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Mum	Dad	Mum	Dad	Mum	Dad	Mum	Dad
S/he is not at all cool	39	42	82	80	14	11	18	20
S/he doesn't understand what kids need to have these days	40	41	81	78	14	14	20	21
S/he is boring	54	56	92		6	6	9	12
S/he is not too much fun to be around	51	56	89	88	8	7	12	13

Mum
Dad
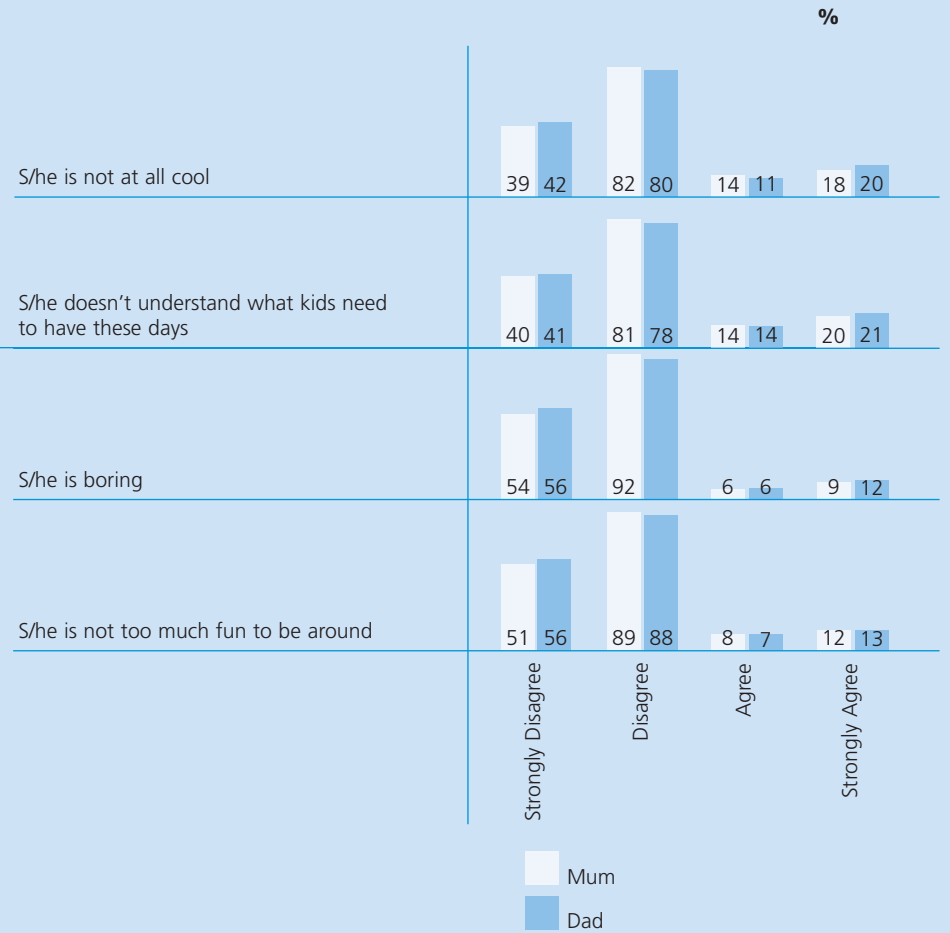
Table 33: Attitude to mum, by sex

%

	boys	girls
She is not at all cool	22	14
She doesn't understand what kids need to have these days	24	16
She is boring	14	4
She is not too much fun to be around	14	9

strongly disagree that 'I am inclined to feel that I am a failure'. Over seven in ten agree or strongly agree with the statements 'On the whole I am satisfied with myself' and 'I feel that I'm a person of value, at least as valuable as other people', and disagree or strongly disagree that 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of'.

These will provide useful baseline statistics for future studies and for studies using a representative sample of the UK child population.

As with the youth materialism scale, this is the first time that the RSES has been used in this way in the UK. Our study provides an opportunity to comment – not just on what the scale is measuring, but on the scale itself. A recent 53–country study noted that some nationalities had problems using negatively worded items on the scale,[92] an issue also identified by Marsh.[93] It will be noted from Table 30 that in response to three of the

negatively worded questions ('At times I think I am no good at all', 'I certainly feel useless at times', and 'I wish I could have more respect for myself') around half of children agree and half disagree. This means that the scores on these items are much lower than the other items. While statistical tests show that this scale is reliable and valid for use in our final model, and while rigorous pilot tests implemented prior to our main survey ensured that children of all ages really understood the questions, future research on developing wellbeing scales for children might want to consider the issue of negatively worded questions.

Self-esteem scores by age

Age, as a predictor of self-esteem, has yielded different findings. Several longitudinal studies (that is, over time)[94] and a cross–sectional study (that is, between populations)[95] have found that self-esteem levels remain constant across age groups, and thus

that increased age is not a significant predictor of self-esteem. Other longitudinal research has shown a gradual increase in self-esteem across adolescence[96] Conversely, studies have also shown that self-esteem decreases over time during adolescence.[97] Robins and colleagues reported that self-esteem is highest during childhood, drops significantly during adolescence, and then rises again moving into adulthood.[98]

Our study showed no significant difference in the RSES by age, either on a junior/senior basis or by calendar age. As our age range was from 9 to 13, with no representatives from later adolescence, our findings cannot be directly compared with some of the studies above.

Self-esteem scores by sex

In a study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Emler notes that research on sex and self-esteem has consistently shown boys to have slightly higher self-esteem scores than girls.[99] Our study supports this. The boys' self-esteem score from our sample is higher, at 29.3, than girls' 28.3. This amount is small but significant. There is no established theory to account for this, but most studies of self-esteem in children have compared a number of possible indicators of self-esteem (besides sex) and sex has not proved to be a primary indicator.

Self-esteem scores by socio-economic group

While age and sex are linked with wellbeing measures in limited or ambiguous ways, living in a deprived area and having a low socio-economic family status has generally been assumed to have a negative

impact on children's psychological wellbeing. For these children, vulnerability to depression and maladjustment has been demonstrated to be both above normative rates and rates for children in affluent areas.[100] Interestingly, our survey showed no statistical difference in self-esteem scores for the deprived and affluent groups.

Recent research may be able to provide some explanation for this. Work over the last ten years has begun to speculate that the contextual stressors of affluence might cause an elevation of depressive tendencies above that found in deprived adolescents.[101] These factors might include the expectation to do well at school and the pressure to excel at an increasing number of extra curricular-activities, such as music examinations, ballet examinations, or gaining a place in the first football team. This trend was alluded to in a letter to *The*

Daily Telegraph, which cited pressure to perform as having a toxic effect on children.[102] Thus, similar self-esteem scores across both groups do not necessarily mean that socio-economic group is not a predictor of self-esteem, but that the dynamic works in different ways in different households. While the self-esteem of children living in deprived households may be impaired by difficult conditions, that of affluent children may be lowered by constant pressure to achieve, resulting in similar scores for the two groups.

It is important to note that our total sample was drawn from areas rated above 28 and below five on the Multiple Deprivation Index (for further details of the sample, see the section on methodology, above). We had no 'normative' sample (for example, children drawn from areas rated around 14) to compare with. For the impact of socio-economic group on the self-esteem of UK 9-13-year-olds to be understood, this

sample needs to be included in future research.

Family dynamics

As the research area of the materialism–wellbeing interaction in the lives of children is only just emerging, the findings of our report are not directly comparable with other research findings. As with other measures proposed in this study, they can act as a benchmark for future studies and to make comparisons across groups.

Table 31 shows that over half of the children surveyed report arguing with their parents about TV and computer at least some of the time, and two-thirds argue about other things at least some of the time. There was no difference in the frequency of these types of argument by either sex or socio–economic group, but junior school children argue with their parents about TV significantly more than their senior school counterparts.

It can be seen from Table 32 that about a fifth of children think that their parents aren't really 'with it' – for example, they are not cool and don't really know what kids need. In general, the children don't think that their parents are dull or drab: only nine per cent think their mum is boring (compared with 12 per cent for dads) and only 12 or 13 per cent believe neither of their parents is much fun to be around.

Boys and girls rated their fathers similarly, but significantly more boys thought their mothers not cool, not understanding, boring and not so fun to be around (Table 33).

This finding remains unexplained and is a question to be pursued in future research.

Overall summary: wellbeing

Studies empirically testing links between materialism and wellbeing are not numerous; such studies relating to children are very scarce indeed.

It is hypothesised that materialism can impact negatively on wellbeing in two ways: by creating dissatisfaction, and by creating tension in social relationships.

Studies in adults have tended to use measures of life satisfaction and dissatisfaction as indicators of reduced wellbeing.

As children tend to internalise negativity, these external life satisfaction measures may not really be an accurate gauge of their wellbeing.

At the same time the use of psychological instruments that are normally used to screen for pathologies, such as depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms may also not be appropriate for measuring overall wellbeing across a general sample of children.

The Rosenberg self-esteem scale seems to provide a robust and reasonable measure of childhood

wellbeing in relation to materialism. Suggestions for future research on children's self-esteem include investigating a possible confusion over negatively worded questions.

In line with previous research, boys had a slightly higher average self–esteem score than girls.

We found no relationship between age and self-esteem.

The self-esteem score for the deprived group was not significantly different from that of the affluent group. Drawing on previous research and theory, it seems possible that while difficult social conditions can have an adverse effect on the self–esteem of the deprived group, pressure to achieve can have an effect of similar magnitude on the affluent group. Thus while the self–esteem scores of these two groups are similar to each other, it is possible that they may be different from a child in an area that is neither deprived nor affluent.

More than half of the children surveyed report arguing with their parents about TV and computer at least some of the time and two thirds argue about other things at least some of the time. Junior school children argue significantly more with their parents about TV than their senior school counterparts.

We did not find the children generally saying their parents are dull and drab.

What now remains to be seen is whether there are links between our three constructs of watching, wanting and wellbeing.

4 The links

Watching, wanting and wellbeing

Inspired by the work of Juliet Schor in the USA[103] and Buijzen and Valkenburg in Holland,[104] we built a series of models to help us understand the dynamics between watching, wanting and wellbeing in UK children. Our models are not exact replications of either of these studies: our survey reflects social circumstances in the UK in 2006. Media and social structures are different in these three countries and, for reasons explained in the previous chapters, the metrics we have chosen are not the same.

Statistical techniques

In the following pages we use regression analysis, which is a powerful and flexible procedure for analysing associative relationships between variables – for example, amount of TV watched (TV score) and level of materialism (materialism score), or the relationship between the materialism score and self–esteem score. We use the analysis in two principle ways:

Existence of association: First we determine whether the independent variable (e.g., TV score) explains a significant variation in the dependent variable (e.g., materialism). In other words, is there an association between the two variables such that the higher the TV score, the higher the level of materialism (positive association)? Or that the higher the TV score the lower the level of materialism (negative association)? Or is there no association between the two?

A convention of asterisks (★) is used to indicate the level of significance of the association between variables. The highest level of association, which has only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance, is indicated by ★★★. An association which has a five per cent probability of being the result of chance is indicated by ★★. An association that has a 10 per cent probability of being the result of chance is indicated by ★. Any association weaker than this is not considered significant.

Comparing magnitude of links

Second, we determine the relative strength of the links in the model (e.g. does watching TV or watching the computer screen have a stronger impact on the materialism score?). The numbers shown on the links in the model are what are known as standardized regression coefficients or beta weights. These allow us to compare, for example, the impact of TV watching on materialism with the impact of materialism on self–esteem, even though these are measured on very different scales. Some beta weights will be positive (e.g. an increase in TV watching is associated with an increase in materialism), while others will be negative (e.g. an increase in materialism is associated with a decrease in self esteem). In general, the beta weights range from 0 to 1 in absolute terms, and the larger the beta weight, the greater the impact of one variable on another variable. (In technical jargon, a beta weight of 0.5 indicates that a change of one standard deviation in one variable will lead to a change of 0.5 standard deviations in the other variable).

Path models are used to hypothesise about the direction of a number of associations. The statistics confirm whether the data fits this model or not. Our model hypothesis is that media exposure leads to materialism, which in turn has a negative impact on wellbeing.

While the independent variables may explain the variation in the dependent variables, it is important to note that this does not necessarily imply causation. Sometimes the causation in an association is obvious. For example, there is an association in this study between sex and shopping. We have established

that our regression models fit the data well; however the associations between the constructs of media exposure, materialism and wellbeing must be treated with caution, as only a study of movements in the variables over time would reliably demonstrate causality.

The following models are explained in this report:

Model one: two paths

1. Watching TV/computer – materialism

2. Materialism – self-esteem

Model two: two paths

1. Watching TV/computer – materialism

2. Materialism – parent/child conflict

Model three: four paths

1. Watching TV/computer – materialism

2. Materialism – opinion of parents

3. Materialism – self-esteem

4. Opinion of parents – self-esteem

Model four: four paths

1. Watching TV/computer – materialism

2. Materialism – opinion of parents

3. Materialism – parent/child conflict

4. Opinion of parents – parent/child conflict

Model one: two paths (Diagram 1)

Path one: from TV and computer use to materialism

In this model we used the children's TV scores, computer scores and both parts of their advertising scores (liking adverts, believing adverts) as our first input and tested the correlation between each of these and each child's level of materialism. We found a strong, significant and positive association (★★★) between TV score, computer score and materialism. These links are significant, having only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance. We can therefore confidently say that high media exposure is associated with high levels of materialism. We can also say that the association between computer score and materialism (0.19) is weaker than the link between TV score and materialism (0.32). It will be interesting to track these scores over the coming years

in order to monitor if these relative associations remain constant over time or if a stronger correlation between time spent on the computer and levels of materialism will emerge. There is also a link between liking adverts and materialism. This is significant, having only a five per cent (★★) probability of being the result of chance, though considerably weaker than the link for TV and computer use (0.10). Simply believing TV adverts is not associated with materialism at all.

Taken together, our measures of media exposure explain around 20 per cent of a child's materialistic orientation, with TV on its own explaining almost a third. This is a strong association for a construct which, as we have seen, is partly driven by personality traits.

This study has established for the first time that there is a strong and significant association between media exposure and materialism in

UK children. By comparing the impact of advertising on the one hand with exposure to TV and computer content on the other we have also made a contribution to the overall understanding of this association. Since the 1980s a substantial amount of research[105] has investigated the relationship between advertising and the materialistic orientation of children, but fewer studies have investigated the effect of general media exposure, and none have measured the relative strength of the two inputs.

Is there also an association between a materialistic attitude and a child's wellbeing? The second path on our first model measures this.

Path two: The links between materialism and self-esteem

Our first model does confirm that there is a significant negative association between a child's level of materialism and his or her self-esteem score. This means that the more materialistic a child is, the

lower his or her self-esteem.

It can be seen from the regression co-efficient (-0.09) that this association, while significant – it has only a five per cent (★★) probability of being the result of chance – is weaker than any of the links between watching and wanting. The link between TV score and materialism (0.32), for example, is 3.5 times stronger. This is certainly not surprising: self-esteem is a highly complex subjective construct which is the result of the interaction of many influences in a child's life. Low self-esteem may be the result of being bullied, parental conflict at home, pressure to perform or, indeed, genetic predisposition.

This data fits our hypothesised model that high media exposure leads to high materialism, which in turn leads to lower self-esteem. This conclusion supports the work done by Juliet Schor in the USA[106] and Buijzen and Valkenburg[107] in Holland: while none of these studies

can claim to have proved causality, the fact that the data fits the same general model does add to the reliability of the model.

The next step for future research into this dynamic is to add a time series element. If we can show that movements in individual children's media exposure patterns, materialism and self-esteem scores confirm our hypothesis then we can, with greater confidence, claim not only that this model is significant but also that it is truly causal.

Model two: two paths (Diagram 2)

Model two is similar to model one except that the wellbeing output is parent-child conflict rather than self-esteem.

We found a significant (★★★) and positive association between materialism and parent-child conflict: more materialistic children

argue more frequently with their parents. This link is stronger (0.14) than the link between materialism and self-esteem (-0.09).

Buijzen and Valkenburg's study showed a significant series of links between advertising exposure, children's requests to buy products and parent-child conflict. We have added to this by showing a link between materialistic orientation and conflict.

This exploration of the dynamics of the links between materialism and wellbeing has proved fruitful. Beyond our finding that media exposure, materialism and self-esteem are significantly associated, we are also able to conclude that there are significant associations between children's materialism and their relationship with their parents.

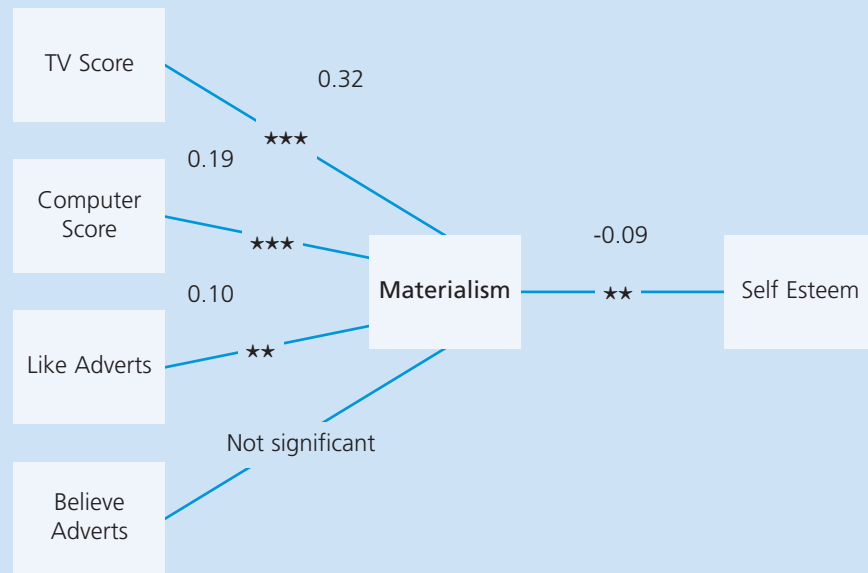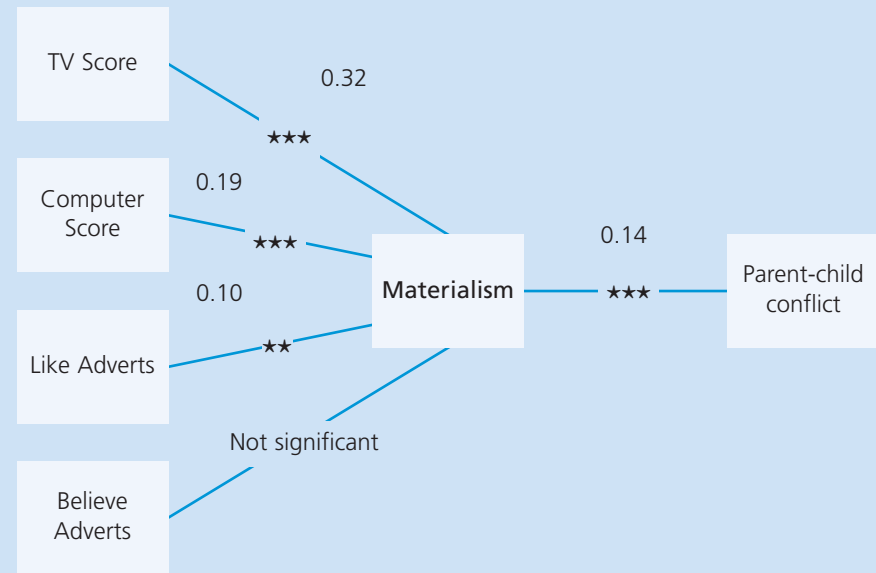**Diagram 1**
Model one: two paths

watching → wanting → wellbeing

TV Score — 0.32 ★★★
Computer Score — 0.19 ★★★
Like Adverts — 0.10 ★★
Believe Adverts — Not significant

Materialism — -0.09 ★★ — Self Esteem

Diagram 2
Model two: two paths

watching → wanting → wellbeing

TV Score — 0.32 ★★★
Computer Score — 0.19 ★★★
Like Adverts — 0.10 ★★
Believe Adverts — Not significant

Materialism — 0.14 ★★★ — Parent-child conflict

Model three: four paths (Diagram 3)

In line with Juliet Schor's model, in our model three we inserted attitude to parent as a mediator between materialism and self-esteem.

This model tests an indirect link between materialism and self-esteem in addition to a direct route. There are four separate paths:

Path one: from watching to wanting

The association between TV and computer use and materialism remains strong and significant and the relative strength of the three 'watching' scores remains the same as in model one.

Path Two: from materialism to attitude to parents

The association between materialism and attitude to parents is strong, negative (–0.26) and statistically significant, having only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance (★★★). The more

materialistic children are, the lower an opinion they have of their parents.

Path three: from attitude to parent to self-esteem

The association between attitude to parent and self-esteem is strong, positive (0.21) and statistically significant, having only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance (★★★). This means that children who think less of their parents also think less of themselves.

This supports the evidence in model two that there is an association between materialistic values and impaired family relationships: not only is materialism correlated with parent-child conflict, it is also related to children's opinions of their parents. Moreover, there is an association between opinion of parents and opinion of self: when children have a low opinion of their parents, they also exhibit low self-esteem.

Path four: from materialism to self-esteem

In the paths analysed so far it has been clear that the direct link between materialism and self esteem (–0.09) is relatively weak. In model three, the introduction of attitude to parents between materialism and self-esteem results in the direct link between materialism and self-esteem becoming insignificant. The link still exists, but it is clear that the indirect association of materialism, attitude to parent and self-esteem is stronger than the direct link between self-esteem and materialism per se. This supports the theory that the relationship between materialism and wellbeing in children is bound up with family dynamics, rather than simply involving feelings of dissatisfaction.

Interestingly, an edition of Panorama broadcast on BBC 1 on 18 June 2007 appears to support the idea that TV affects family dynamics. For the programme, which was called *Is TV bad for my kids?*, volunteer
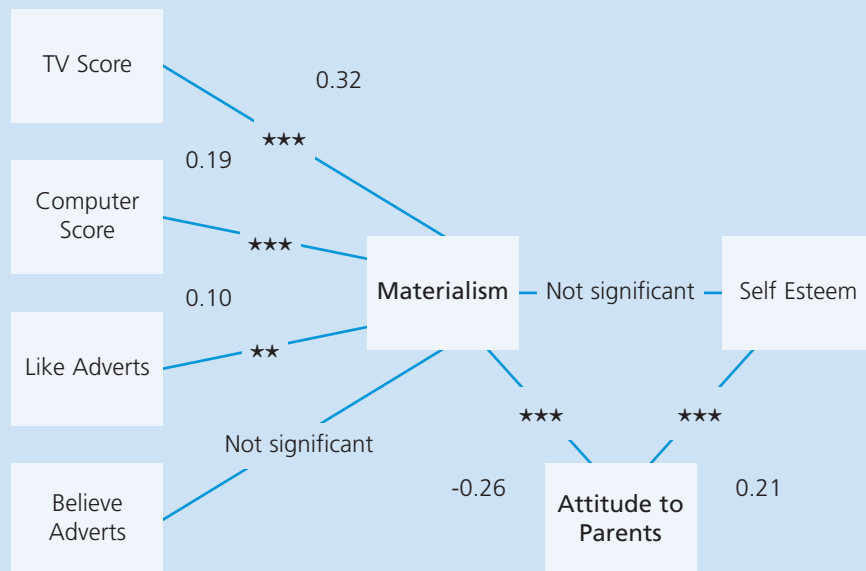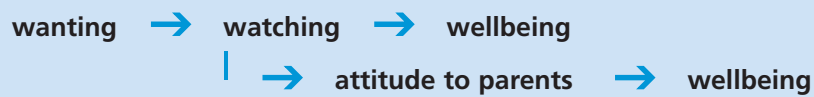
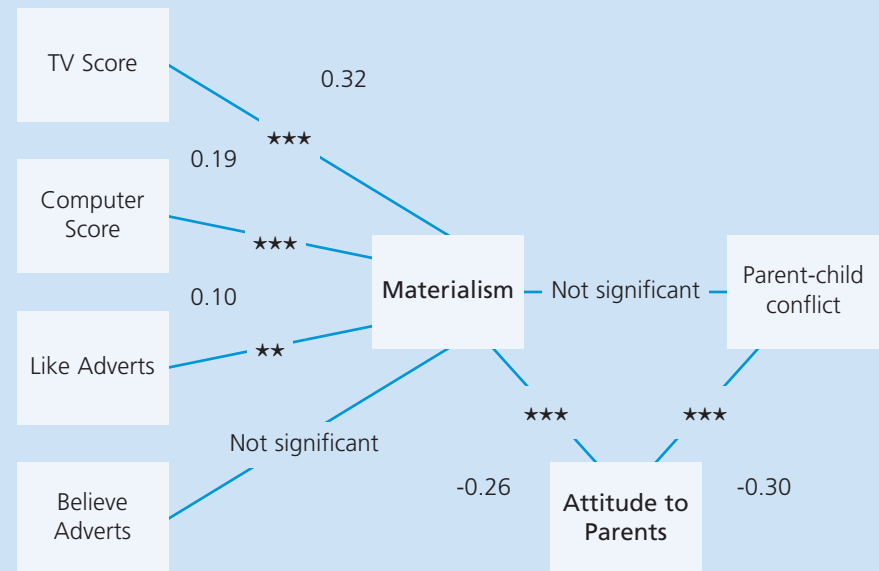**Diagram 3**

Model three: four paths

wanting → watching → wellbeing
            | → attitude to parents → wellbeing

TV Score

0.32
★★★

Computer Score
0.19
★★★

Materialism — Not significant — Self Esteem

Like Adverts
0.10
★★

Not significant

★★★　　　　★★★

Believe Adverts

-0.26　　Attitude to Parents　　0.21

Diagram 4

Model four: four paths

wanting → watching → parent-child conflict
            | → attitude to parents → parent-child conflict

TV Score

0.32
★★★

Computer Score
0.19
★★★

Materialism — Not significant — Parent-child conflict

Like Adverts
0.10
★★

Not significant

★★★　　　　★★★

Believe Adverts

-0.26　　Attitude to Parents　　-0.30
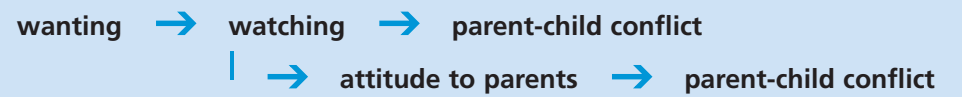
Diagram 5
Model three by sex

Boys only

TV Score — 0.35 ★★★ → Materialism
Computer Score — 0.14 ★★ → Materialism
Like Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Believe Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Materialism — Not significant — Self Esteem
Materialism — -0.19 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents
Self Esteem — 0.22 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents

Girls only

TV Score — 0.27 ★★★ → Materialism
Computer Score — 0.24 ★★★ → Materialism
Like Adverts — 0.13 ★★ → Materialism
Believe Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Materialism — Not significant — Self Esteem
Materialism — -0.30 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents
Self Esteem — 0.23 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents

Diagram 6
Model four by sex

Boys only

TV Score — 0.35 ★★★ → Materialism
Computer Score — 0.14 ★★ → Materialism
Like Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Believe Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Materialism — Not significant — Parent-child conflict
Materialism — -0.19 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents
Parent-child conflict — -0.35 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents

Girls only

TV Score — 0.27 ★★★ → Materialism
Computer Score — 0.24 ★★★ → Materialism
Like Adverts — 0.13 ★★ → Materialism
Believe Adverts — Not significant → Materialism
Materialism — 0.18 ★★★ — Parent-child conflict
Materialism — -0.30 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents
Parent-child conflict — -0.23 ★★★ → Attitude to Parents

families agreed to have TVs, computers and games consoles taken away from their seven and eight year olds for two weeks. Relationships between the children and their parents improved in an environment without TV and computers.

In model four we examine whether there is also an association between attitude to parents and family disputes.

Model four: four paths (Diagram 4)

In model four we inserted attitude to parent as a mediator between materialism and parent–child conflict.

Path one: from media exposure to materialism

As with models one, two and three, the link between media exposure and materialism remains strong and significant, and the relative strength of the three media use scores remains the same.

Path two: from materialism to attitude to parents

Likewise, the link between materialism and attitude to parents remains negative, strong (-0.26) and statistically significant, having only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance (★★★).

Path three: from attitude to parent to parent-child conflict

The association between attitude to parent and parent–child conflict is negative, strong (-0.30) and statistically significant, having only a one per cent probability of being the result of chance (★★★). This means that children who think less of their parents not only have lower self-esteem but also feel that they argue with their parents more. In fact the association between attitude to parents and parent–child conflict (-0.30) is stronger than that between attitude to parents and self-esteem (0.21).

Path four: from materialism to parent-child conflict

Given the strength of the associations between materialism and parent–child conflict and attitude to parent and parent–child conflict, it may not be surprising that, with the introduction of attitude to parents into model four, the direct association between materialism and parent–child conflict (which we saw in model two) becomes insignificant. Again, the association exists but the mediated relationship of materialism, attitude to parent and parent–child conflict provides a better explanation.

We ran models three and four for both boys and girls, and for both socio-economic groups, in order to ascertain if the models described a general phenomenon or whether differences existed between particular sub-groups.

Models three and four by sex and socio-economic group (Diagrams 5-8)

Model three holds secure across the sexes but there are some differences in the strength of some associations. The association between TV score and materialism is stronger for boys, while the association between computer score and materialism is stronger for girls.
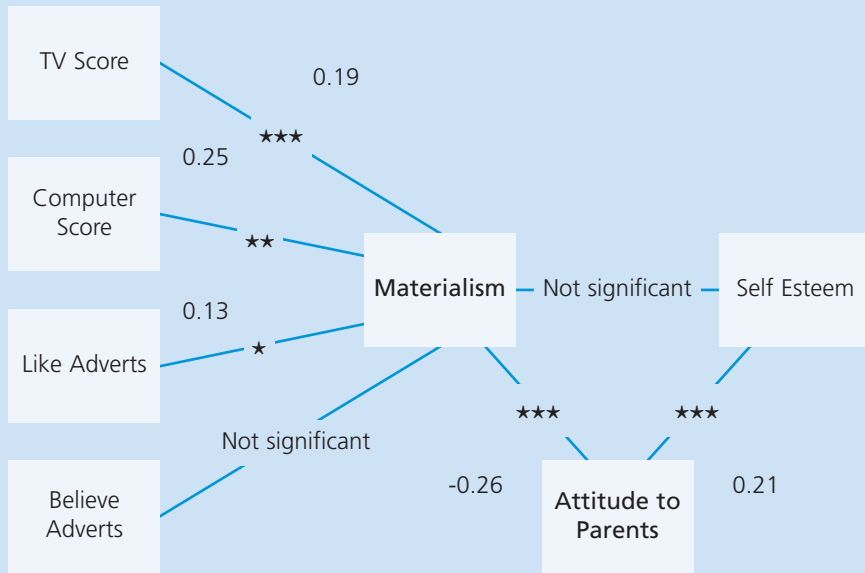
A liking of adverts is not associated with materialism for boys although it is for girls. It is also the case that the association between materialism and attitude to parents is stronger for girls (-0.30) than boys (-0.19).

In model four (where parent–child conflict is used as an indicator of wellbeing) the relationship between attitude to parents and parent–child conflict is greater for boys than girls, and the direct association between materialism and parent–child conflict is significant for girls but not for boys. This direct link is not there in model three (with self-esteem used

Diagram 7
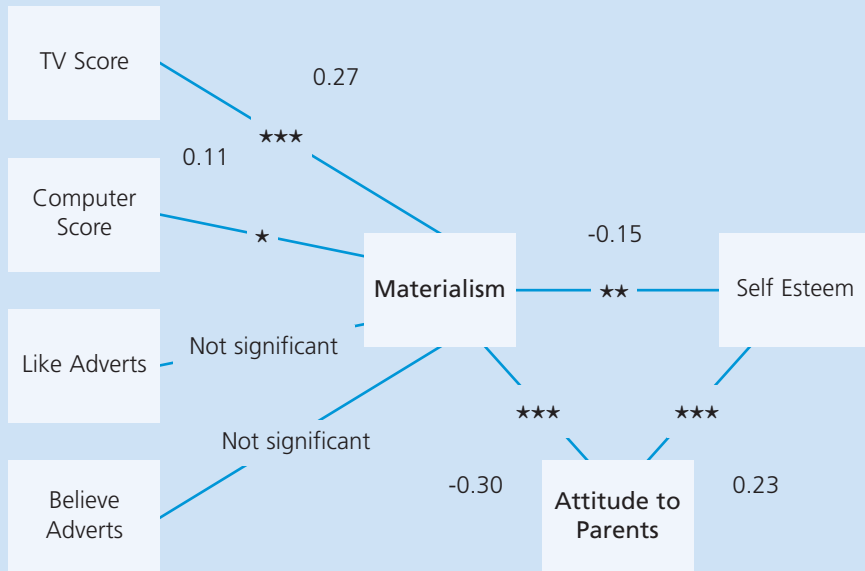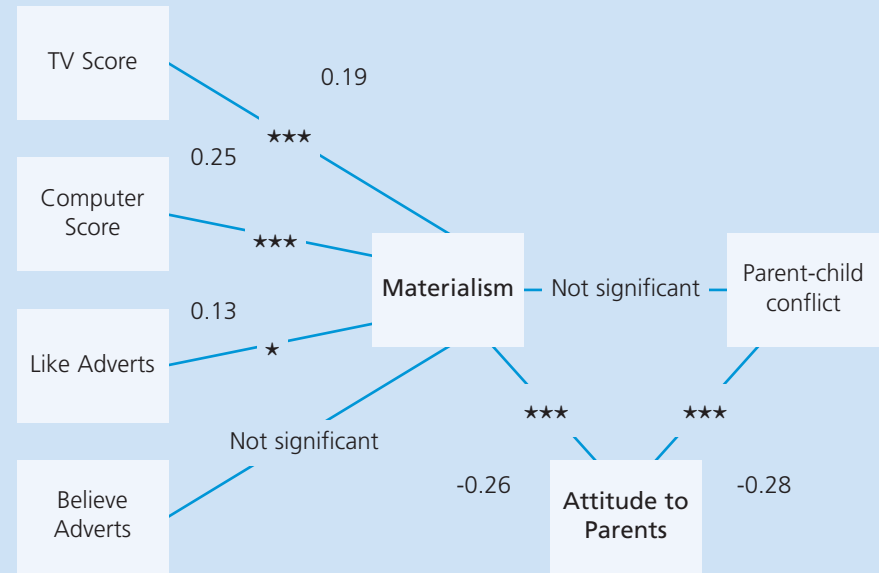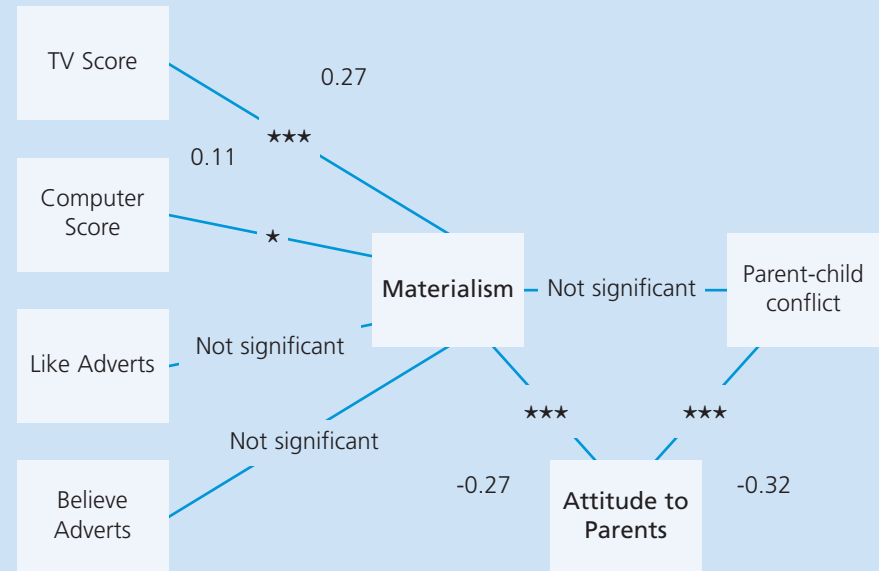Model three by socio-economic group

Deprived Area Only

TV Score
Computer Score
Like Adverts
Believe Adverts
Materialism
Self Esteem
Attitude to Parents

0.19 ★★★
0.25 ★★
0.13 ★
Not significant
Not significant
-0.26 ★★★
0.21 ★★★

Affluent Area Only

TV Score
Computer Score
Like Adverts
Believe Adverts
Materialism
Self Esteem
Attitude to Parents

0.27 ★★★
0.11 ★
Not significant
Not significant
-0.15 ★★
-0.30 ★★★
0.23 ★★★

Diagram 8
Model four by socio-economic group

Deprived Area Only

TV Score
Computer Score
Like Adverts
Believe Adverts
Materialism
Parent-child conflict
Attitude to Parents

0.19 ★★★
0.25 ★★★
0.13 ★
Not significant
Not significant
-0.26 ★★★
-0.28 ★★★

Affluent Area Only

TV Score
Computer Score
Like Adverts
Believe Adverts
Materialism
Parent-child conflict
Attitude to Parents

0.27 ★★★
0.11 ★
Not significant
Not significant
Not significant
-0.27 ★★★
-0.32 ★★★

as the wellbeing indicator). Thus while the overall model holds, it seems that sex does play a part in this dynamic and should be followed up in future research.

Overall, model three also holds across socio-economic groups, but with some differences in the strength of associations. The association between TV score and materialism is stronger for the affluent group, whereas the computer score has a stronger association with materialism for the deprived group. Liking adverts is associated with materialism in the deprived group, but not in the affluent group. Interestingly, even with the inclusion of the attitude to parent mediator, the direct link between materialism and self-esteem is significant for the affluent area but not for the deprived area.

Model four (parent–child conflict as wellbeing indicator) works in the same way for both groups, with a slightly stronger association between attitude to parents and parent–child conflict in the affluent group.

Summary of links between watching, wanting and wellbeing

Summing up, we can conclude from the four models that there is a significant positive relationship between media use and materialism and that there is a significant negative association between children's level of materialism and their self-esteem. Moreover, this latter association appears to be mediated by family dynamics – for example, that elevated levels of materialism are associated with impaired attitudes towards parents and with more frequent arguments between children and parents.

Testing models three and four across sex and socio-economic group allowed us to see that the general principles of the model are robust. The association between media use and materialism remains consistently strong and significant in all sub-groups. The links between materialism and attitude to parents, and attitude to parents and self-esteem, also remain consistently strong. There are some differences in strength of association between boys and girls and between the two socio-economic groups. These should be investigated in future research to enable new theory-building.

While we cannot claim causality from these models, our data fits the paths specified. Reliability is further boosted by the fact that data from studies in three separate countries have been shown to fit similar path models. Thus, having established that these associations exist among a sample of children aged 9–13 in the UK, it now remains for time-series research to address the issue of causality.

5 Conclusions

Watching, wanting and wellbeing in children are not easily defined or measured, and the associations between them are not easily understood.

This study has defined children's **watching** (TV and computer use) in terms of the amount of time spent in front of a TV or computer screen, and their attitude towards advertising.

Wanting (materialism) has been defined as a child's set of personal values, including the ideas that money leads to happiness, that material objects signal success and that ownership leads to satisfaction.

Children's **wellbeing** has been defined in terms of their global self-esteem, which has been shown to be a reliable indicator of depressive tendencies in later life.

We used parent-child conflict as another measure of wellbeing and also introduced children's attitudes to their parents into our analysis.

We have used the Goldberg youth materialism scale for the first time in the UK, and in addition have developed a new media exposure scale. For the first time in a study of this nature, we have used the well-validated Rosenberg self-esteem scale and other measures capturing aspects of family dynamics.

We have built a series of path models, which have shown strong and significant associations between media exposure (watching) and materialism (wanting), and between materialism and self-esteem (wellbeing). We have shown that the relationship between materialism and self-esteem is bound up in family dynamics. This provides some support for the theory that materialism is associated with impaired social relationships, which in turn are associated with how children feel about themselves.

This is an important finding, which adds to a small but growing body of research considering the impact of consumer culture on individual children in the context of family life.

We have shown a glimpse of what happens in some UK households, where the electronic screen plays a dominant part in children's lives. TV and computers are omnipresent. Children sit in front of them before they go to school and when they come back from school; in some communities a third of families accompany mealtimes with TV programmes and even the computer. As computers play a greater part in the lives of all children it seems likely that even more time will be spent in front of screens. The impact that this may have on children's values and, importantly, on relationships within the family remains to be seen.

We found that, with children watching a much wider range of programmes than those made specifically for them, attempts to ban specific types of advertising in children's programme time will not protect much of the under-14 population.

Perhaps one of the most important findings of our study is the uncovering of a divided society, in which different communities display very different attitudes to media consumption and, concomitantly, display very different levels of materialism. In this study, commercial influence was shown to be exerted unevenly across the population, as children in deprived areas seemingly had a great deal more unrestricted TV and computer access. Many more deprived children have their own private TV set, DVD player, video player and computer.

Limitations and future research

No study is ever perfect, and this study also has limitations. It is hoped that future researchers may be able to fill the gaps. We did not include magazines or radio in our definition

of media. Magazines in particular may well supply enticing lifestyle images related to brand use.

Though children are generally very spontaneous and honest when filling out questionnaires it is possible that they may tend to give answers to some questions that they think the researchers want to hear. Other methods of ascertaining childhood materialism, such as collage or sorting tasks, could be experimented with.

It is possible that the negatively worded items on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale confused some children. More work could be done on devising scales that are completely foolproof even for very young children.

We used measures of wellbeing covering only a few aspects important to childhood, namely self-esteem and relations with parents.

▶ We have established significant paths of association between watching, wanting and wellbeing. The next step is to gather time-series data so that causality can be truly tested. Does heavy media exposure cause materialism? Does materialism cause a lowering of self-esteem?

▶ We also need qualitative work in family homes. How exactly does the association between materialistic values and poor opinion of parents work? Is it that the values promulgated in children's television drive a wedge between parents and children? Or is it more bound up with 'pester power': children making purchase requests that are refused? Does refusal by parents of children's purchase requests lead children to have a lower opinion of parents? And how exactly does a lower opinion of parents interact with how children feel about themselves?

▶ Do the arguments associated with materialistic values play out differently in different households? Is conflict in more affluent households caused by parents' unwillingness to allow unfettered access to TV and computer time and the purchase of desired goods? And is the conflict in more deprived households caused by a financial inability to provide the material possessions that children want? Or are other dynamics at work?

▶ The importance of peer groups increases as children get older. Research needs to be done on wanting–watching–wellbeing dynamics in relation to the creation and transmission of values among children.

▶ In terms of sampling and research design, future research should also include a sample drawn from a catchment area scoring in the middle of the Multiple Deprivation Index. Different measures of wellbeing could be used. And different ways of capturing materialism in younger children could be experimented with.

To conclude: watching, wanting and wellbeing are clearly interlinked in the lives of children, and we have a great deal more fruitful research ahead if we are to gain a deeper understanding of this increasingly important social issue.

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