# Branded for life? Researchers examine impact of consumer culture on UK's children

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Consumers of fashionable brands, the latest gadgets, and the coolest looks are getting ever younger. Yet, children who immerse themselves in consumer culture feel worse about themselves, not better, say researchers at the University of Sussex.

The Children's Consumer Culture Project at the University has involved three years of work with 1,500 children to investigate how materialistic and appearance-focused values develop in childhood, and to study the impact of consumer culture and advertising messages about what is "cool" and beautiful on children's well-being.

The project's preliminary research findings will be shared today (3 May 2013) with researchers, policy makers, and diverse organisations at a special event at the University. The opening address will be given by Caroline Lucas MP, and attendees include teachers, schools representatives, social, educational, and clinical psychologists, academics, and charity representatives.

The project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and led by University of Sussex psychologists Dr Helga Dittmar and Professor Robin Banerjee, combines in-depth interviews with children and large-scale surveys and experiments to assess the impact of exposure to consumer culture on children aged 8-14 years.

The project assesses how children respond to consumer culture and advertising, which dictate what is beautiful, desirable, and cool, and

examines whether such aspirations lead to lower self-esteem and lower well-being in children.

Results show that children with lower well-being are more drawn to the consumer culture value system, seeing improvements to [physical appearance](#) and [material possessions](#) as a route to making gains in their social status. Yet these efforts in fact are likely to be counter-productive. The research team has shown that, over time, those who strive to achieve consumer culture ideals become more rejected within their [peer groups](#) and end up feeling worse overall.

The conference and research findings are timely. The [Bailey Review](#) of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood was published on 6 June 2011 and a Government assessment of progress made so far in implementing its recommendations is due to be published. Furthermore, in April 2013 a campaign was launched '[Leave Our Kids Alone](#)', petitioning for advertising aimed at under 12s to be banned.

Here, Helga Dittmar and Robin Banerjee discuss the reasons behind the research and their findings.

## Why is it important to study consumer culture, children and well being?

Robin: Many children see consumer culture as a way of gaining acceptance and social status among their peers, believing that 'you are liked more if you have cool things and look good'. In fact, we have found that children who already feel bad about themselves are more likely to turn to consumer culture values for answers, even though these values are detrimental to their body esteem, their emotional functioning, and their subjective well-being. In contrast, children who feel secure in their identity are buffered against such a downward spiral.

## What is new in what you are saying?

Helga: The relationship of consumer culture values with lower well-being is well-documented in adults, but there is hardly any research on children, even though concern about the detrimental effects on children's well-being is rising. We are investigating body image concerns and materialistic values as twin, interlinked, core components of contemporary consumer culture that are particularly relevant to young people today.

Having studied more than 1,000 children for over two years, we are also able to address – for the very first time – the pressing question of how the links play out over time between the idealised body images and acquisitive impulses of consumer culture on the one hand, and the identity and well-being of children on the other.

## How could law/government/society/individuals tackle any negative associations for children with regard to consumer culture?

Helga: The materialistic and appearance-focused values that British consumer culture promotes can be detrimental to children's well-being, which may help to explain why British children emerged with low scores of well-being in a UNICEF report published this month (16th out of the 27 richest countries, below Slovenia and Portugal).

International differences in advertising regulations may also play a role: for example, in Norway and Sweden, television advertising aimed at children aged below 12 is banned. Advertising and media regulations, such as those recommended in the Bailey Review [add hyperlink] and by the Leave Our Kids Alone campaign [add hyperlink], may help to address the negative impact of consumer culture on children's well-being

here in Britain.

The Government's [Body Confidence Campaign](link) aims to promote positive body image among society, parents, and young people, an intention echoed in various media innovations (such as Channel 4's 4Beauty web site).

The University of Sussex research findings also underline the importance of raising awareness about the effects of consumer culture in contemporary Britain. [Children](link) can be helped – both at home and at school – and may even be able to help themselves and their peers, to put consumer culture into perspective, and to learn about the qualities that really underpin positive social relationships, emotional health, and general well-being.

Provided by University of Sussex