

Pressure to be cool and look good is detrimental to many children

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

The pressure to be cool, look good and own the 'right stuff' is detrimental to many children and teenagers, according to new research by University of Sussex psychologists.

The study shows that, while many [young people](#) buy into consumer

culture believing it will make them feel better about themselves and help them to make friends, often the reverse happens.

The result is a negative downward spiral, say the researchers, whereby those with low well-being turn to consumerist values, which impacts further still upon their state of mind.

In a UK study of 1,000 children aged 8-14 over three years, being disruptive, having 'cool stuff' and looking good was often seen as the best way to become more popular among peers. The results, however, show that valuing these behaviours actually has the opposite effect, with peer relations worsening over time for those kids turning to consumer-culture values.

There are also some interesting differences between boys and girls: [depressive symptoms](#) in boys tends to predict increases in their materialism, whereas depressive symptoms in girls tends to predict the internalisation of appearance concerns.

The research will be presented today (Friday 11 September) at the British Psychological Society's Developmental and Social Psychology Section annual conference.

Dr Matthew Easterbrook, Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sussex, will present some of the findings at the conference. He says: "Our results suggest that children who have low levels of well-being are particularly likely to become orientated towards consumer culture, and thus enter into a negative downward spiral.

"Consumer culture may be perceived as a coping mechanism by vulnerable children, but it is one that is detrimental to their well-being."

Professor Robin Banerjee, Professor of Developmental Psychology at

the University of Sussex, will also present at the conference, focusing on the impact of consumer culture on popularity. He says: "Our study shows how consumer-culture values are tied up with images of social success in childhood.

"Although friendly and helpful children were ultimately more popular over time, young people mistakenly predicted that the route to being liked was in having a reputation for disruptive behaviour, having 'cool' stuff and looking good.

"What we found was another example of a downward spiral - those rejected by peers then turned to consumer culture, which actually worsened, rather than improved, those relationships."

Dr Mark Wright, now a lecturer in psychology at the University of Brighton, will also present the findings of a related study, which found that, while damaging for both groups, fashion models were more resilient than other young women to the emotional impacts of the pursuit of the perfect appearance. The impact on their well-being was mediated to some degree by their greater sense of belonging, the study found.

The latest research is part of a wider project at the University, led by Sussex psychologist Dr Helga Dittmar, that is systematically examining the impact of consumer-culture ideals on children's personal and social well-being.

Provided by University of Sussex

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