



*Consumed by Consumer Culture? Advertising's Impact on Children's  
Materialism and Life Satisfaction*

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# CHAPTER 1

Introduction,  
Dissertation Outline,  
and Conclusions

In the debate on the ethics of advertising, much attention is being devoted to the commercialization of childhood. Each year, an increasing amount of money is spent on child-directed advertising (Kunkel et al., 2004). The era in which children grew up in an essentially non-commercial world is long gone (Buckingham, 2013). There is no avoiding advertising as the estimated number of television commercials children are exposed to annually vary from approximately 10,000 in the Netherlands and the UK (Oprea, Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, 2013; Piachaud, 2007) to 40,000 in the United States (Kunkel, 2001). Western children are said to grow up in a consumer culture, “a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). In other words, today’s children grow up in a culture in which advertisers propagate the belief that beauty, happiness and success can be gained through consumption (Harmon, 2001; Richins, 1995).

Many parents and caretakers feel powerless to the excessive amount of commercial pressure placed on their children (Preston, 2004). They worry that their children will be consumed by consumer culture and will be taught that “the good life is attainable through the goods life” (Center for a new American Dream, 2011). As many as 9 out of 10 parents believe that advertising instills materialism in their children (Smith & Atkin, 2003). This emphasis on the ownership and acquisition of material possessions provides a distraction from the intrinsic values that are assumed to genuinely matter in life, such as maintaining supportive relationships and establishing personal growth (Kasser, 2002). Increased materialism has therefore often been linked to lower life satisfaction in research among adults. Kasser describes the relation between materialism and life satisfaction using the metaphor of a seesaw: if one goes up, the other goes down (in: Center for a new American Dream, 2011). Once engaged in materialism, people enter a vicious circle: if materialism rises, life satisfaction lowers, and when life satisfaction is lowered, materialism further rises. When caught up in this spiral of consumerism, it is difficult to escape.

Anticipating parents’ anxieties, a number of popular scientific books have been written about children’s advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction, carrying revealing titles such as “Born to Buy” (Schor, 2005), “Consumer Kids. How Big Business is Grooming our Children for Profit” (Mayo & Nairn, 2009), and

“Consumed. How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole” (Barber, 2007). In addition, several research articles on the subject have been published (for an overview, see Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a). Although these works provide some important insights – showing that children’s advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction are indeed interrelated – they share two important limitations. First, different researchers have used different measurements for the same construct, which makes it difficult to compare their work and draw overarching conclusions. There is a need for reliable and validated measures that can be used as standards. Second, researchers have used cross-sectional designs, not allowing for conclusions about causality. Hence, there is a need for longitudinal research to disentangle relationships over time.

By addressing the aforementioned limitations, the research in this dissertation expands on previous research. Its first aim is to establish reliable and valid measures for children’s advertising exposure and materialism. Its second aim is to investigate the causal relations between children’s advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction using a longitudinal design. In cross-sectional research, the positive association between children’s advertising exposure and materialism and the negative association between children’s materialism and life satisfaction have persistently been interpreted as the first causing the latter. By studying these relationships over time, the research in this dissertation will reveal whether these interpretations were accurate. Theoretically, causality may also move in the opposite direction, and the relationships could be reciprocal. It is of key importance to study two-sided effects because children’s advertising exposure could potentially cause a reinforcing spiral of children becoming more materialistic and therefore becoming less satisfied with their lives, becoming more materialistic and so on.

Because people hold on to the values they obtained during childhood, materialistic children are likely to become materialistic adults (Bukatko, 2008). Hence, advertising may not only affect children’s current well-being but also their future well-being. In research among adults, in addition to being linked to decreased life satisfaction, materialism has been found to cause people to live beyond their means, go into debt, and experience increased stress in their daily lives (Garðarsdóttir & Dittmar, 2012; Watson, 2007). These are serious problems that need to be prevented. The research for this dissertation was conducted among 8- to 11-year-olds as studies in developmental psychology have indicated that children

first start to develop materialistic orientations during this period (see John, 1999). By providing theoretical insights into the development of materialism in children, the studies in this dissertation will provide an increased understanding of how to tackle the previously mentioned issues at their core. Knowing whether and how advertising causes increased materialism and decreased life satisfaction is essential for creating effective intervention strategies that can be implemented during childhood.

## **Dissertation Outline and Main Findings**

The chapters in this dissertation were written between 2009 and 2013 by the author and were co-authored by her advisors Moniek Buijzen, Eva A. Van Reijmersdal, and Patti M. Valkenburg. Each chapter was originally written as a research article to be submitted for publication in a scientific journal. For this reason, each chapter has its own theory, results, and discussion section, as well as its own reference list. Because some chapters have already been published, the findings in one chapter may be referred to in another chapter by referencing the corresponding article. In this section, the theoretical background and the findings of each chapter are elaborated upon. The implications of the findings are discussed in the final section of this chapter, which also includes recommendations for future research.

### **Part 1: Developing Measures**

The first part of this dissertation contains two chapters. These chapters are designed to tackle the first aim of this dissertation: to determine how the two main concepts of advertising exposure (Chapter 2) and materialism (Chapter 3) can best be measured. The structures of the chapters are similar. First, how the concept has been measured in previous research is explained. Second, if deemed necessary, alternative definitions and measures are suggested. Third, the reliability and validity of these measures are determined. Each chapter ends with a recommendation for the ideal measure.

#### **Chapter 2: Measuring children's advertising exposure.**

Chapter 2 addresses the concept of children's advertising exposure. It follows

Slater's (2004, p. 168) definition of exposure: "the extent to which audience members have encountered specific messages or classes of messages / media content." In previous research, children's advertising exposure has been measured on four different levels: (1) exposure to the medium, (2) exposure to content (i.e., commercial and non-commercial), (3) exposure to commercial content, and (4) exposure to content weighted for advertising density (Oprea et al., 2013). The predictive value of measures is generally thought to increase with content specificity (Romantan, Hornik, Price, Cappella, & Viswanath, 2008; Slater, 2004). In this chapter, the reliability and validity of advertising exposure measures of all four levels are compared. Each measure was administered twice, with a two-week period in between, to a total sample of 165 children aged 8 to 11 years (51.3% of whom were girls). Without exception, the measures proved to be suitable for measuring children's advertising exposure. The measures yielded consistent scores over time, were strongly correlated to each other, and related to other constructs (i.e., gender, age, advertised product desire, and materialism) in expected ways. These findings have important implications for future research because the content items related to television channels, television programs, and Internet websites can easily be adapted to measure advertising exposure through upcoming media, for instance, popular branded apps (e.g., 'How often do you use the app xxx?').

### **Chapter 3: Measuring children's materialism.**

Chapter 3 addresses the concept of children's materialism. Similar to children's advertising exposure, children's materialism has been measured in many different ways in previous research (for an overview, see Oprea, Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Valkenburg, 2011). However, none of the existing measures include all three dimensions of materialism (i.e., Material Centrality, Material Happiness, and Material Success; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004). Chapter 3 introduces a new measure for children's materialism, the Material Values Scale for children (MVS-c), that combines all three dimensions. For each dimension, six items were created. The full-length 18-item MVS-c was administered twice, with a one-year period in between, to a total sample of 466 children aged 8 to 11 years (55% of whom were girls). Based on its factorial structure, two shorter versions were developed, with respectively two items or a single item per dimension. Each version of the MVS-c demonstrated high performance in terms of test-retest reliability and construct validity, relating to the

materialism scale of Buijzen and Valkenburg (2003b), gender, life satisfaction, and normative and informative peer group influence in the expected ways. Therefore, all three versions can be used in future research to measure children's overall materialism. Researchers may also use a subset of items to study the causes and consequences of the separate dimensions of materialism.

## **Part 2: Investigating Effects**

The second part of this dissertation also contains two chapters. These chapters address the second aim of this dissertation by examining the causal effect of children's advertising exposure on materialism (Chapter 4) and the causal relation between children's materialism and life satisfaction (Chapter 5). In both chapters, a longitudinal design is used.

### **Chapter 4: The causal effect of advertising exposure on children's materialism.**

Chapter 4 addresses the effect of advertising exposure on children's materialism. The presented study had two aims: (1) to determine if children's advertising exposure leads to materialism and (2) to investigate how children's advertising exposure leads to materialism. Because advertising aims to increase children's desire for the advertised products and previous studies indicated that advertised product desire creates an overspill to general product desire (see Coon & Tucker, 2002), it was expected that advertising exposure had a positive effect on materialism, mediated by children's advertised product desire. To test this hypothesis, a longitudinal survey study was conducted among a total of 466 children aged 8 to 11 years (55% of whom were girls). The survey was administered twice, with a one-year period in between. The analyses showed that advertising exposure led to increased advertised product desire and that advertised product desire led to increased materialism. No reverse effects were found. Advertised product desire and materialism did not predict advertising exposure.

### **Chapter 5: The causal relation between children's materialism and life satisfaction.**

Chapter 5 investigates the longitudinal relation between materialism and life satisfaction, taking into account the role of advertising. Based on research conducted

among adults, it was expected that increased materialism would lead to lower life satisfaction. In addition, because previous research among children has indicated that advertising exposure causes materialism (Opree, Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Valkenburg, 2013), it was predicted that advertising exposure would have a negative longitudinal effect on life satisfaction via materialism. Finally, it was expected that decreased life satisfaction would lead to increased materialism. This effect could be stronger for children who were frequently exposed to advertising because advertising promotes the thought that products can bring happiness (Richins, 1995). To test the hypotheses, a longitudinal survey study was conducted among a total of 466 children aged 8 to 11 years (55% of whom were girls). The survey was administered twice, with a one-year period in between. Its results indicated that materialism did not predict life satisfaction. However, decreased life satisfaction did lead to increased materialism, and this effect was moderated positively by children's advertising exposure. In other words, unhappy children only became materialistic when they were frequently exposed to advertising.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The first aim of this dissertation was to study how children's advertising exposure and materialism could best be measured. In previous studies, different measures have been used by different researchers (for an overview, see Opree et al., 2013; Opree et al., 2011). This made it difficult to compare studies and to draw overarching conclusions. The studies in this dissertation showed that previous measures for children's advertising exposure were equally reliable and valid (Opree et al., 2013). Because they yielded similar estimates of children's advertising exposure, these measures can be used interchangeably. Conversely, the previous measures for children's materialism were unsuitable. None of these measures took into account the fact that materialism is a three-faceted construct. Therefore, they did not truly measure what they were designed to measure (Opree et al., 2011). In this dissertation, a new measure called the Material Values Scale for children (MVS-c) was developed and validated. Adopting the MVS-c as a standard measure will enhance knowledge accumulation, enabling researchers to build on each other's work.

The second aim of this dissertation was to examine advertising's causal effect



on children's materialism and to investigate the causal relation between children's materialism and life satisfaction. Previous cross-sectional studies interpreted the correlations between children's advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction as advertising causing materialism and materialism causing lower life satisfaction (for an overview, see Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a). However, the longitudinal research conducted in this dissertation leads to groundbreaking conclusions as it shows that these previous derivations were incorrect. As suspected, children who were frequently exposed to advertising became more materialistic (Oprea et al., 2013). However, children who were materialistic did not become less satisfied with their lives. Rather, convincing evidence was found for the reverse: children who were less satisfied with their lives became more materialistic. However, this effect only occurred when children were frequently exposed to advertising (Oprea, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2012).

The findings in this dissertation provide new input for the debate on the ethics of child-directed advertising. Up until now, the debate has been strongly influenced by the views presented in popular scientific books on children's consumer culture (e.g., Barber, 2007; Mayo & Nairn, 2009; Schor, 2005). Their authors have made a strong and compelling case against child-directed advertising by elaborating on the wide variety of advertising techniques children are continuously exposed to and by linking this exposure to all sorts of negative outcomes, including increased materialism and decreased life satisfaction. Parents and caretakers have been led to believe that they are raising a money- and possession-oriented generation that will never feel completely satisfied. The facts, however, are clearly more nuanced. The longitudinal research in this dissertation unmistakably shows that although children's advertising exposure led to increased materialism, increased materialism did not lead to decreased life satisfaction.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Developing valid measures and applying them in longitudinal research has made it possible to unravel the causal relations between children's advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction. Confirming previous expectations, the findings in this dissertation show that advertising exposure leads to materialism (Oprea et al., 2013). Some authors believe that this increased focus on consumption may, in turn,

result in increased exposure to advertising. Children may start using advertising as a means to advance their marketplace knowledge (Lawlor, 2009; McDermott, Hastings, Stead, Carrigan, Harris 2008). However, the empirical findings in this dissertation contradict this notion. Children's materialism did not cause an increase in advertising exposure (Opree et al., 2013). This is an important revelation because it indicates that children do not get 'caught up' in consumer culture. Advertising exposure is a predictor, not an outcome variable.

The research in this dissertation not only assessed if children's advertising exposure causes materialism but also how it may do so. It was found that advertising evokes an increased desire for frequently advertised products and that this increased desire for frequently advertised products transcends to an increased general desire for products (Opree et al., 2013). Children seem to internalize the belief that advertised products may bring beauty, happiness, and success first before generalizing this belief to other products. By reducing advertising's effect on advertised product desire or reducing the effect of advertised product desire on materialism, it may be possible to reduce advertising's effect on materialism. Because the relation between children's advertising exposure and materialism is indirect, it is of vital importance to refine previous models and include advertised product desire as a mediator variable.

The research in this dissertation shows that the relation between materialism and life satisfaction is fundamentally different for children than for adults. Among adults, research has supported the *escalation hypothesis*, which states that materialism leads to lower life satisfaction because materialists develop an insatiable desire for material objects (Richins, 1995; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 1999; Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004); the *adaptation hypothesis*, which claims that materialists experience a larger gap between their actual and desired states (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 1999; Solberg et al., 2004); and the *displacement hypothesis*, which suggests that due to their increased focus on material objects, materialists may displace their focus on interpersonal relationships and inherent needs (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 1999; Solberg et al., 2004). However, none of the aforementioned hypotheses seem to hold for children as materialism was found to have no effect on children's life satisfaction (Opree et al., 2012).

Theories of consumer development provide an explanation for why the escalation hypothesis, adaptation hypothesis, and displacement hypothesis do not apply to

children aged 8 to 11 years. Young children are financially and emotionally dependent on their parents (Bukatko, 2008). Although children exert great influence on family purchases, their purchase requests are frequently declined (John, 1999; Mangleburg, 1990; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005). This teaches children that they cannot have every product they want, preventing them from developing insatiable desires, which would result in a gap between their actual and desired states. Furthermore, material objects do not seem as important to children as their relationships with others. Adults' values may go astray when they become more materialistic, but children's priorities remain unaffected. Despite the commercial pressures on them, when asked to describe a 'good' day, children mention spending time with those they love (i.e., family, friends, and pets), being creative and active, being outdoors, and having fun – not gaining new material possessions (Ipsos Mori & Nairn, 2011).

Finally, the research in this dissertation confirms that children with decreased life satisfaction do become more materialistic (Opree et al., 2012). This effect has been frequently replicated in research among adults (for an overview, see Kasser, 2002) but had never been tested among children. The effect was found to be moderated by advertising exposure (Opree et al., 2012). Due to advertising, children with decreased life satisfaction start thinking of products as a means to an end, believing that consumption may increase their life satisfaction. These findings have important theoretical implications because not only do they suggest that previous models on the causality between children's materialism and life satisfaction have been incorrect (i.e., suggesting that materialism leads to decreased life satisfaction, when the opposite is true), they also stress the importance of including advertising exposure in studies on children's consumer-related behaviors. How children feel, think, and act in relation to products may be determined in a large part by advertising.

### **Practical Implications**

Many parents are concerned that advertising causes their children to become more materialistic (Smith & Atkin, 2003). The research in this dissertation may substantiate these worries. Although increased materialism did not seem to lead to lower life satisfaction in the short run, it could have harsh consequences in the long run. Materialistic children are likely to become materialistic adults, and this may cause serious harm at both the individual and societal level. Highly materialistic individuals

tend to live beyond their means and accrue debt, causing them to experience stress and to become less satisfied with their lives (Garðarsdóttir & Dittmar, 2012; Watson, 2007). It may be problematic for society if too many people in a country are in debt because it may lead to financial crisis – as it recently has in the United States and in countries all over Europe (Garðarsdóttir & Dittmar, 2012). For the aforementioned reasons, both parents and countries may still want to invest in mediation strategies to reduce advertising's effect on materialism.

Findings from the fields of communication science and consumer psychology suggest that there are three possible strategies for reducing advertising's effect on materialism. First, the removal of the source can be attempted (Kasser, 2002). Several European countries have policies prohibiting advertising during children's programming and/or restricting advertising from being directed at children under 12 years of age (Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2005). In countries in which no such policies are in place, such as the Netherlands, it seems unattainable for parents to ban advertising from children's lives all together. Still, parents may choose to mute the television when advertisements are on and install ad blocks on their computer to block advertisements on web pages (Kasser, 2002). It must be noted, however, that the effectiveness of such restrictive mediation strategies has been questioned in the past (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005).

A second approach to decreasing advertising's effect is by applying active mediation strategies. Active mediation involves co-viewing and making instructive comments and judgments about television commercials (e.g., 'advertising does not always tell the truth'), actively explaining the nature and selling intent of advertising (e.g., 'commercials are designed to make you want to buy their products'), and explaining the persuasive tactics advertisers use to influence their audience (e.g., 'commercials are designed to make you like their products') (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2009). In the past, active mediation has been found to lower advertising's effect on both children's advertised product desire (Rozendaal et al., 2009) and materialism (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005).

A third way in which to decrease children's materialism is by promoting intrinsic values, such as personal growth, maintaining supportive relationships, and improving the broader world. As prosocial values increase, materialism will decrease (Kasser, 2002). In this dissertation, it was found that low life satisfaction is a predictor for materialism, but its findings can also be interpreted in the opposite direction: children

who are satisfied with their lives do not become materialistic (Oprea et al., 2012). Because positive intrinsic values benefit life satisfaction, it is indeed likely that advertising's effects can be counteracted by interventions that teach children to seek happiness and fulfillment in things other than possessions.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Previous research suggests that media effects do not hold equally for all groups of children (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). For that reason, future research should focus on the conditional effects of advertising on children's materialism. Children differ in their susceptibility to media effects due to differences in their dispositional, developmental, and social susceptibility (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). By mapping the moderating influences of these different forms of susceptibility, researchers may determine which groups of children are most vulnerable to advertising. This type of knowledge can be used to determine which groups of children should be targeted with interventions.

First, dispositional susceptibility includes several factors that may influence children's selection of and responsiveness to media, including temperament and personality (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). It is important to note that children's life satisfaction is dependent on their biological tendency to feel happy (Bukatko, 2008). Children with a high tendency to feel happy may be invulnerable to advertising effects. After all, they do not need to seek fulfillment from possessions or their acquisition. Other dispositional factors influencing media effects are children's values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). Previous research indicates that children's attitudes toward advertising are predictive of their susceptibility to advertising effects (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2012). Future research should investigate whether children's attitudes toward advertising moderate the effect of advertising on materialism.

Second, developmental susceptibility depends on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). In general, children are thought to be the most vulnerable to advertising because they are least able to process advertising critically (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010). At age 12, children still do not have an adult-like understanding of advertising's selling and persuasive intent (Rozendaal et al., 2010). To compare the effects of advertising across age

groups, similar measures need to be administered. To that end, the reliability and validity of the scales that are presented in the first part of this dissertation should be assessed in samples of older subjects. Due to their specific content, it seems particularly important to study until what age the Material Values Scale for children (MVS-c) can be administered and at what age a transition to the original MVS should be made.

Third, social susceptibility refers to all social contexts that can influence children's selection of and responsiveness to media, including family, friends, and culture (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). Children with materialistic parents or friends are more likely to become materialistic themselves (Auty & Elliott, 2001; Chia, 2010; Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio, & Bamossy, 2003). If children are taught by their social environment that possessions are important, they may be more interested in advertising and, subsequently, more vulnerable to its effects. Note that the research in this dissertation focuses on the effect of consumer culture by studying the effects of television advertising. Because child-directed advertising transcends the medium of television, the next step in investigating the effects of consumer culture is to study the effects of other forms of advertising. In recent years, both children's Internet use and their use of mobile devices (i.e., smartphones and tablets) have increased greatly (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). As a consequence, the practice of using complementary and reinforcing advertisements across media has become popular (Todd, 2010). Future research should investigate whether this so-called convergence of advertisements leads to accumulative effects.

The research presented in this dissertation can be used as a starting point for future research into children's advertising exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction. The measures that have been introduced for measuring children's advertising exposure and materialism can be used across disciplines (e.g., communication science, psychology, and sociology) and in all research methodologies that use children's self-reports, including surveys, experiments, and interviews. Using these measures, future research will be able to assess the moderating impact of children's dispositional, developmental, and social susceptibility. The measures can also be used to assess the moderating impact of interventions on the effect of advertising exposure on children's materialism. In short, the next important step is to investigate which children are most vulnerable to advertising's effect on materialism and how to counteract it now that it has been uncontestedly confirmed that such an effect exists.

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