

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

SELL THEM THEIR DREAMS. People, especially kids, don't buy things to have things. They buy hope. Sell them this hope and you won't have to worry about your sales." This celebratory song of a society high on materialism addressed to a conference of salesmen sums up the reality of contemporary urban life. It turns adolescents into a significant consumer segment, not parent-dependant but individuals with an increasing urge to flaunt everything from mobile phones to designer clothes. Brand-consciousness, a fast growing trend among children, has its roots in this urge to belong, or in behavioural scientist Erich Fromm's words "to stay close to the herd". Arnish Uberoi, a 13-year-old student of Chennai's Padma Seshadri Bal Bhawan, has no doubts about the importance of branded goods in his life. "I will remain popular and accepted if I wear popular brands," he says.

In an interview to a city tabloid, Vani Aggarwal, 13, remarked that she liked wearing only Guess and Versace clothes. She is not an isolated example; it is a recurrent message that strobos through Indian urban society. Children are defining themselves by what they possess. "I buy, therefore I am" has become the mantra for today's teens.

"Possessions" to them mean branded products that spell status and popularity. Gone are the days of cheap canvas shoes and frilly frocks sewn by mothers at home. Girls now want Mango T-shirts and designer-label jeans. Boys who were earlier brought up to take pride in ink-stained shirts and scuffed shoes now worry about what gel works best with their hair and what model of cell phones they sport. Their list of "must-haves" reads like a catalogue of a sophisticated mall: trendy clothes, watches, cosmetics, accessories, shoes, mobile phones, CDs, music systems, smart PCs, sports gear, hair dryers and umpteen other gizmos—all the fancy paraphernalia of the "with-it" lifestyle. The latest "necessity" is add-on credit cards over and above the fat weekly allowance for trips to hang-out joints or to beauty salons.

The burgeoning purchasing power of these brand brats has given the market its little kings and queens. Even in times of economic gloom, the last thing parents compromise on is spending on their children. Estimates put the market for children's products at Rs 5,000 crore. The confectionery market alone is estimated at Rs 1,400 crore and the apparel market at Rs 500 crore. While children's

Material Children

As more urban children define themselves by what they can buy, blatant consumerism becomes the new religion for adolescents



NEW DELHI

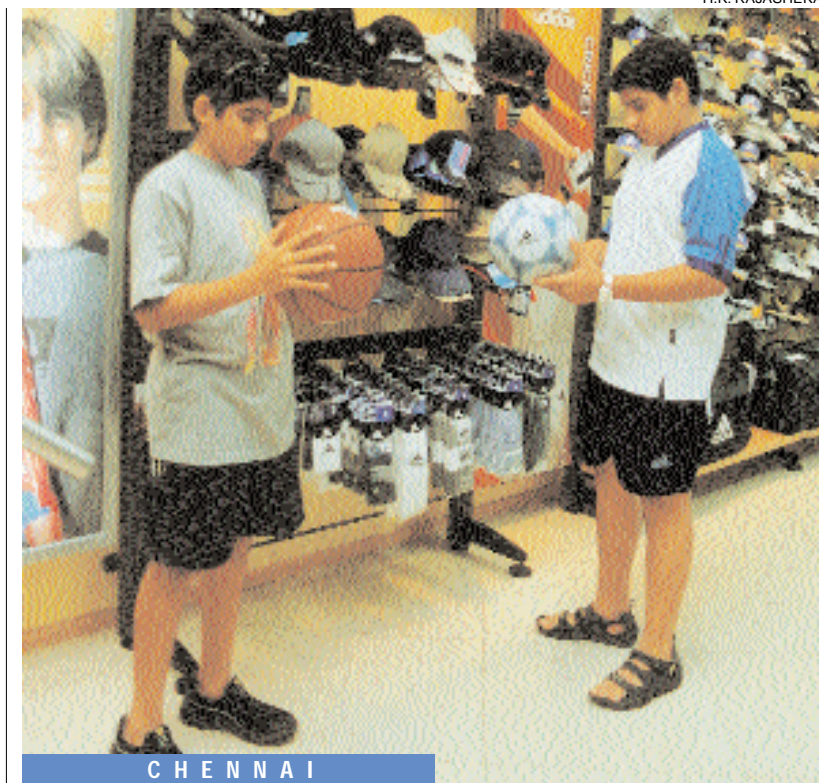
Bhumika Watts (9)

HANKERS AFTER: jeans and T-shirts, perfumes and shoes with flat heels.

"My friend got her Walkman in a day, get me one this evening."

HEMANT CHAWLA

H.K. RAJASHEKAR



CHENNAI

Arnish Uberoi (13)

HANKERS AFTER: PlayStation II, branded clothes, T-shirts and a mobile phone

"Buy me PlayStation II, and I will perform better in studies and sports."

footwear is a Rs 1,000 crore market, personal-care products are pegged at Rs 300 crore. "Children mostly come looking for nail polish, shine-control lotions and sunscreen," says Saurabh Amte, beauty adviser at the Lakme counter at Delhi's Shopper's Stop. "They are so well-informed that even their parents seek their help," he adds.

Shweta Chhabria fits the bill. The 15-year-old student of Mumbai's St Joseph's Convent Girls School, recently asked her parents for EverYouth almond and apricot cream. She uses perfume every day and says trendy western clothes and junk jewellery make her happy. Even small children are big on cosmetics. Bhumika Watts, 9, a Delhi girl who still plays with dolls, says she is fond of perfumes. And cosmetics are not just a girlie craze. "I wanted the Aamir Khan cut, so I use Brylcreem and L'Oreal hair gel to keep them spiky," says Nikhil, a 13-year-old student of Delhi Public School.

Footing the bill are over-indulgent parents. There are, of course, some pre-

cocious youngsters who use emotional blackmail to get what they want. Arnish and his brother Adish, 15, often make "deals" with their parents for expensive video games, apparel and shoes in return for better performance at school. Arnish's current demand is PlayStation II, a computer game that costs Rs 18,000.

Children, in turn, are driven by peer pressure. Most adolescents fear peer rejection. "I borrow my friends' designer clothes for the disco, otherwise I feel inferior," confesses Sushmita Garg, 13, as she slips into borrowed embroidered trousers and a Benetton top at the ladies room at Delhi's Le Meridien before heading for CJ's, a discotheque that offers post-noon dance parties.

The conspicuous consumption race creates a rift between children, some kept in check by parents, others unabashedly materialistic. "There are separate groups in our class based on their spending habits," says Vaishnavi Tannir, 12, of Delhi's Vasant Valley School. "There is a nerdy group which doesn't bother about fashionable brands and there is a popular group which judges others by the brands they wear," she explains.

What confounds adults is the amount of information children have on market trends. Samsika Marketing Consultants MD Jagdeep Kapoor conducted a study covering 1,344 children in the 9-14 age group in nine metros from 1999 to 2002 and identified nine prominent traits. In 2002, information, inquisitive-



MUMBAI

FAWZAN HUSAIN

ness and income were added to the previous trait list of informal, intelligent, identity conscious, influential to accommodate the emerging trends.

While market wizards are changing their coordinates, parents are a confused lot. Some admit they have encouraged expensive habits, while others say they don't know where to draw the line. Some women live out their own aspirations through their children. "My mother did not allow cosmetics when I was a child so I am particular that my daughter does not look like a Plain Jane," says Mumbai-based Pooja Chhabria, Shweta's mother. She is a homemaker and stresses that the lavishness is not to make up for any lack of attention. But some part of it is just old-fashioned

pampering. Says Anil Chhabria, Shweta's father: "I love the twinkle in her eyes when she receives clothes and cosmetics."

Guilt drives busy parents who have little time for their children to fill parenting gap by buying expensive gifts and doling out substantial pocket money. But more critical is the fear of "depriving" the child. "I don't want my kids to suffer from low self-esteem," argues Anuradha Uberoi, Chennai-based behavioural consultant and mother of Adish and Arnish. "Knowing how much poor self-esteem can damage a child has changed my outlook," she explains.

Family relationships are a casualty in this wave of consumerism. Cold wars erupt when parents oppose chil-

Shweta Chhabria (15)

HANKERS AFTER: Capri pants, T-shirts, body and hair glitter, skin-care products, junk jewellery, funky shoes.

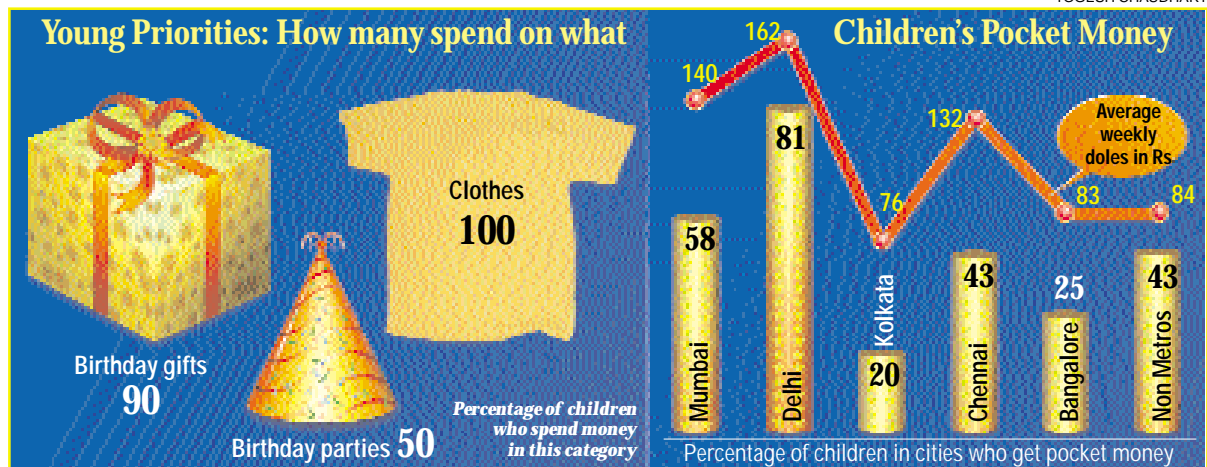
"I will feel deprived if I don't get the things I want."

dren's demands. "Children use parental guilt to get their fancies fulfilled," says psychiatrist Sanjay Chugh, who runs a counselling centre in Delhi. "Drifting away from family is a feature of adolescence, and teenagers seek role models among peers instead of parents," he explains.

MANY parents are worried that consumerism may trap their children into a self-centred way of life. However, Susan Visvanathan, sociologist at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, argues that consumerism is part of the grammar of a globalised capitalist society. "Children who coerce parents into buying more goodies are only victims of a system," she says. "The system does not believe in martyrs, only in survivors. Survival seems to mean an ability to enjoy without looking at the condition of the majority," she ruminates.

Role models have also changed. Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus Christ or Mother Teresa are no longer personalities children idolise. In TV programmes, films and advertisements, the icons are glitzy pop artists and movie stars. Youngsters tend to take the materialism expounded in ads as gospel. Advertisers target children as surrogates to advertise "adult" goods like cars and even credit cards. LG Electronics, for example, uses children in its ads for TVs and refrigerators.

YOGESH CHAUDHARY



Source: Junior Perspectives, a study on region specific and trait specific spending behaviour of children, conducted by Kidsearch, the child specialist division of NFO-MBL, India.

CATCH 'EM YOUNG

Marketing research shows children to be the most effective audience for advertisements

RESearch IS THE KEYSTONE OF a successful ad campaign and the marketing experts have zeroed in on children. Kidsearch, the child research division of market research agency NFO-MBL, has drawn a Kidsmap that has charted four emotional territories for children. The Nursery (safe, cocooned place), the Playground (excitement with challenge and discovery), the Street-corner (fashion, style and status) and The Underground (separation from home, parents). Advertisers are advised to keep these zones in mind. Also important are regional variations as a 2001 survey by NFO-MBL discovered. Non-framed sunglasses, sleeveless black T-shirts, jeans with flowers and tights with zippers were more popular in north India, indicating desire for western things. These children were also found to "enjoy risks" that is like to experiment with different brands so their makers have continually innovate to sustain their loyalty. Children in south India were conservative, averse to risk and looked up to their parents. They need a brand history and tacit approval of their parents before seeking any brand. Once hooked, they are loyalists.

Research suggests that simple language registers quickly with children. Also, that they are a tough audience to please. Children reject miscast actors, messages lost in too many words or images that fail to grab them in the opening seconds. By seven years of age, most children understand what advertisers are trying to achieve and by 10 years children become critical. For all age groups television advertising is a part of entertainment, so TV is an infallible medium to advertise. Packaging means a lot to children. "The right mix of entertainment, humour and a generous dose of parental approval has the desired effect on children," says Karunendra Mathur, director of Montage Advertising.

But most important of all is the brand positioning or the motivating message that the brand intends to convey—and how it differs from its competitors. Children need to be lured at all levels to get them to try a brand and stick to it. McDonald's has used collectable toys, TV ads, promotional schemes in schools and figures such as Ronald McDonald to successfully position itself as the place to be. Boomer bubble gum which commands almost a 55 per cent share of the chewing gum segment has followed a similar strategy. The brand is synonymous with its super hero Boomer, who with fantasy powers is a proven winner with kids. Its jingle "Boom, Boom, Boomer" has spontaneous recall. It is one formula that is booming.



BIG TARGETS: Ads like these from Reebok, Liberty and Pepsodent lure the family through children

TRENDS AND FADS

An NFO-Coke teen survey identified broad types among adolescents:

Vibrant Vanguard: The trend-setters—comfortable with their self-image and the most privileged with lots of pocket money and influence at home.

Conspicuous Confidants: Early adapters need visible symbols of status and success to be ahead of others.

Eager Beavers: The followers do their best to keep up with the trends set by leaders.

Individualistic Idealists: The brand loyalists stay with the established choice and don't care what's in fashion.

Plain Passives: Out of the mainstream, the underconfident Passives are yet to become serious consumers.

Companies know they can win the approval of parents for their brands by promotions in schools. In an interview to *KidsCyclopaedia*, a Net magazine, Reebok's Executive Director (Sales and Marketing) Subhinder Singh Prem says their "Net Practice with Rahul Dravid" last year—on buying Reebok goods worth Rs 1,500 or more, there was a chance of joining a cricket camp with cricketer Dravid—was a hit. "Wooing the kid means wooing the entire family, since children drive the spending decisions," says Amit Burman, director, Dabur India. A study by market research agency NFO-MBL confirms this. About 17 per cent of children in 7-14 age group decide on family purchases. Restaurant chains like Pizza Hut and McDonald's have been quick to catch up. They offer birthday-party packages complete with return gifts, and decorations to make sure that the restaurants register in children's mind as pleasure zones.

Dangers of consumerism range from compulsive spending habits to the "disposable" culture. Products that were considered durables—like wristwatches and cameras for children—now find their way into the trash bin. Right now it is the buoyancy of consumerism that is most obvious. But when the tide ebbs, fulfilling the impossible dreams it has sold to children may not be child's play. ■