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general significance for the community

# The Teenage Consumer

*by Mark Abrams*

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## Editorial

One would not expect the appearance of a significant new economic group to go for long unmarked among economic observers and students of society. It is a little odd, therefore, that some 13 post-war years had elapsed before anyone set out to describe comprehensively the phenomenon of the teenager as a buyer of goods. For he and she began to appear, along with the new stringency in the labour market, as soon as the war was over. Young men and women found themselves newly sought after, and their pursuers were willing and able to pay. They paid factory wages too, so that the low-grade 'service' occupations that had offered the best and often the only prospect before the war found themselves very hard up for labour. A number of suppliers of young people's wants, of course, became aware of this development and responded to it. Advertising columns and—to some extent and more slowly—news and feature columns began to reflect the change. Some of the cruder social aspects of it forced themselves on public notice: zoot suits, flick-knives and even the economic indiscipline of the young had their full share of attention. But no one attempted to provide a comprehensive account of the new development as a business factor until less than a year ago, when the author of this booklet began to present publicly the result of various investigations carried out by himself and the company of which he is the head—Research Services Ltd. In the following pages these are brought together systematically: the result is a body of fact and interpretation which we present to the public in the belief that it has both theoretical interest and considerable practical importance.

'Teenage' is, of course, a term of art. The Oxford Dictionary notes the American origin of the word and with impeccable accuracy allots





it to the years 13 to 19. We, however, endorse the author's adaptation of it to meet the obvious need for a collective word describing young people from the time they leave school till they either marry or reach 25. At that age their elders might still call them young but the real and literal teenager regards them as having gone over to the enemy. If anyone doubts the need for the term as it is here used, or the distinct and homogeneous character of the group to which we apply it, these pages will, we believe, convince him.

The teenager is newly enfranchised, in an economic sense. This has given him the chance to be himself and show himself, and has misled a number of people, especially some elderly ones, into the belief that the young of mid-twentieth-century Britain are something new and perhaps ominous. We ourselves see no cause for alarm, and not much for diagnosing novelty except in the new levels of spending power and their commercial effects. There remains the ancient need for the older to understand the younger, and we now confront a business necessity for this understanding, as well as the older moral and psychological imperatives. That is important; but it is not a herald of doom or of the social revolution. Consider the following passage:

*'adolescents are excessively egoistic, regarding themselves as the centre of the universe and the sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of so much self-sacrifice and devotion. They form the most passionate love-relations, only to break them off as abruptly as they began them. On the one hand, they throw themselves enthusiastically into the life of the community and, on the other, they have an overpowering longing for solitude. They oscillate between blind submission to some self-chosen leader and defiant rebellion against any and every authority. They are selfish and materially minded and at the same time full of lofty idealism. They are ascetic but will suddenly plunge into instinctual indulgence of the most primitive character. At times their behaviour to other people is rough and inconsiderate, yet they themselves are extremely touchy. Their moods veer between light-hearted optimism and the blackest pessimism. Sometimes they will work with indefatigable enthusiasm and at other times they are sluggish and apathetic.'*

This is a summary of the views of many psychologists concerned with adolescence. It was written by Dr. Anna Freud, over 20 years ago.







# The Teenage Consumer

*by Mark Abrams*

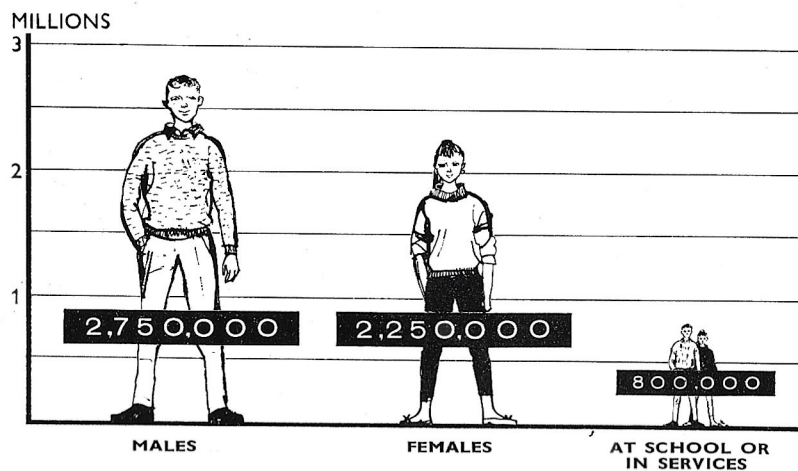
**I**NDUSTRIALISTS who were actively concerned with guiding production and distribution before the war would be hard-pressed to recall any single occasion in those days when businessmen bothered to consider the impact of teenagers' purchasing power on the general prosperity and development of industry. And this pre-war neglect is understandable. In 1938, according to the Ministry of Labour wages survey, the average youth in industry earned 26s. a week and the average young girl 18s. 6d. Probably at least half these wages were handed over by the recipients to their parents and the few shillings a week they retained as free spending money were of little consequence to any manufacturer. The war ended this adolescent poverty and the post-war prosperity of young people has persisted now for over 13 years. Increasingly market research has documented the importance of teenagers as consumers and more and more manufacturers, before embarking on production, now consider it necessary to know something about the tastes and spending habits of these young people. Indeed, so much interest has recently been shown in them that, in order to maintain a reasonable sense of proportion, I will begin with some relevant statistics.

At mid-1958 there were in Great Britain 6,450,000 young people who had reached their fifteenth birthday and were under 25. However, nearly a million and a half of these were married, and since married people can hardly be included in any count of the teenage population we are left with a present total of 5 million single people between 15 and 25— $2\frac{3}{4}$  million males and  $2\frac{1}{4}$  million females. On this definition, teenagers under 25 years of age represent 13 per cent of the total population aged 15 or more.



TOTAL TEENAGERS

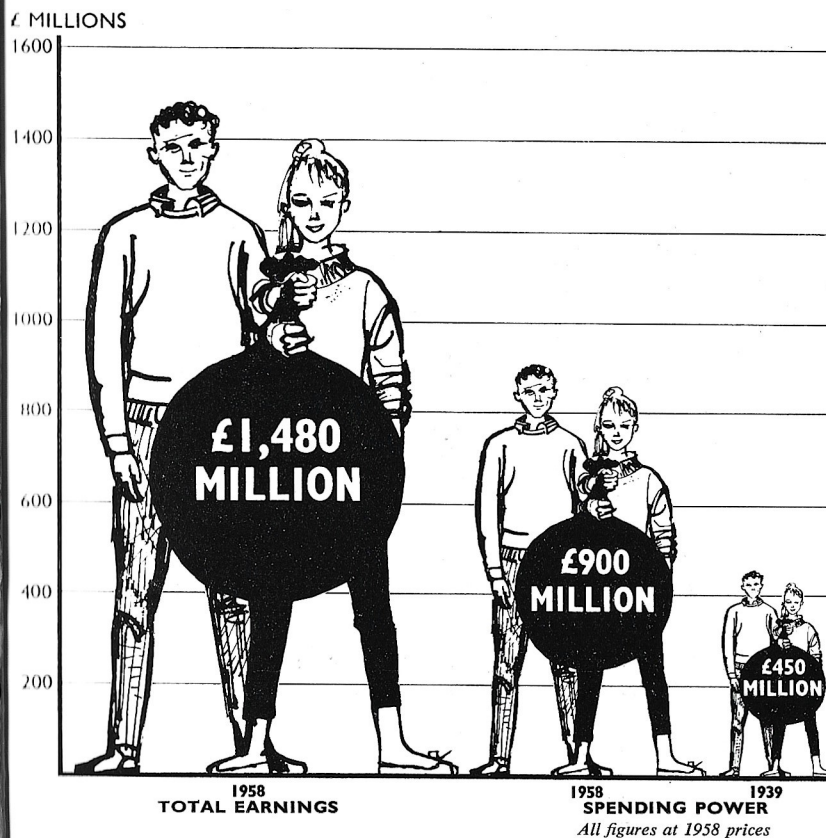
UNMARRIED TEENAGERS



MALES

FEMALES

AT SCHOOL OR IN SERVICES



1958  
TOTAL EARNINGS

1958  
SPENDING POWER

1939

*All figures at 1958 prices*

Their share in the national income is, of course, less than this; in part because 400,000 teenagers are at school and college receiving full-time education; in part, because another 400,000 are in the Armed Forces; in part, because teenagers' earnings are only half those of adult workers and finally because, unlike some of their elders, they are rarely in receipt of large unearned incomes. Using the Ministry of Labour's Censuses of Wages for April and October of 1958 it would seem that the 1,325,000 employed male teenagers under 21 currently receive approximately £350 millions a year, and the remaining 875,000 teenage males aged below 25 and at work receive another £550 millions. The comparable figures for teenage girls would seem to be that the 665,000 at work and under 18 years of age are earning between them £140 millions a year, while the remaining and older 1,335,000 earn £440 millions a year. In grand total then, Britain's teenagers, as wage-earners, are drawing about £1,480 millions annually, or roughly 8½ per cent of all personal income in Great Britain.



JUNIOR MISS  
FASHIONS





But these figures do not tell the whole story. They relate to gross incomes before direct taxation, and teenagers, because of their relatively low incomes, contribute very little to the Exchequer in income tax, though their contributions to State insurance schemes are comparatively high. Again the teenager is normally unencumbered by such adult overheads as private insurance policies, house mortgage payments and hire purchase instalments on durable household goods. On the other hand, the teenager has to pay his parents something for board and keep—a sum that currently seems to range between £1 and £3 a week. I know of no figures that enable one to make precise adjustments for all these factors. For the most part their effects are probably to offset one another, and the position can be broadly summarized as follows: of the 2½ million male teenagers in the country, 2,200,000 are in jobs and earning on average £8 a week; after he has met his fiscal obligations to the State and to his parents the average young man is left with about £5 a week to spend as he chooses. Of the 2½ million female teenagers in the country, 2 million are in jobs and earning on average £5 10s. a week; after she has met her fiscal obligations to State and parents the average young woman is left with about £3 a week to spend as she chooses. Between them, then, the nation's 4,200,000 working teenagers dispose of roughly £17 millions a week of uncommitted spending power—or £850 millions a year. To this latter figure we can add another £50 millions as the amount received as pocket money by the 800,000 non-employed teenagers—making a grand total of £900 millions a year to be spent by teenagers at their own discretion.

Before passing on to consider how today's teenagers spend their money it is worth noting that, as compared with 1938, their *real* earnings (i.e. after allowing for the fall in value of money) have increased by 50 per cent (which is double the rate of expansion for adults), and their real 'discretionary' spending has probably risen by 100 per cent.

The figures of teenage expenditure given in Table 1 are estimates calculated by the author from various general consumer surveys carried out in the past 18 months. (The sequence of the items follows that of the Blue Book on National Income and Expenditure.) They show a high degree of concentration. For example, nearly a quarter of all teenagers' uncommitted money goes on clothing and footwear; another 14 per cent is spent on drink and tobacco, and another 12 per cent on sweets, soft drinks and snacks, etc., in cafes and restaurants;



a good share of the balance goes on entertainment goods—'pop' records, gramophones, romantic magazines and fiction paperbacks, visits to the cinema and dance hall.

By and large, then, one can generalize by saying that the quite large amount of money at the disposal of Britain's average teenager is spent mainly on dressing up in order to impress other teenagers and on goods which form the nexus of teenage gregariousness outside the home. In other words, this is distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world.

*Table 1. Expenditure by Teenagers, 1957*

	<i>All teenagers</i> £ million <i>p.a.</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Average Teenager</i> <i>per week</i>	<i>Teenage spending</i> <i>as % of all consumers' spending</i>
		<i>%</i>	<i>s. d.</i>	<i>%</i>
Chocolate and sweets	35	3.9	2 9	15.2
Soft drinks	15	1.7	1 2	20.0
Meals out	55	6.1	4 3	11.1
Alcoholic drink	40	4.4	3 1	4.3
Cigarettes and tobacco	85	9.4	6 7	8.7
Footwear	45	5.0	3 6	18.8
Men's clothing	45	5.0	3 6	11.9
Women's clothing	120	13.3	9 4	15.6
Bicycles, motor cycles, etc.	25	2.8	1 11	38.5
Records, record players, etc.	15	1.7	1 2	44.1
Books, papers, magazines	25	2.8	1 11	11.4
Cosmetics	15	1.7	1 2	24.2
Other chemists' goods	15	1.7	1 2	9.7
Recreational goods	30	3.3	2 4	18.8
Cinema admissions	25	2.8	1 11	26.3
Other entertainments	30	3.3	2 4	30.6
Holidays	50	5.6	3 11	13.3
All other goods and services	230	25.5	18 0	2.6
	<u>900</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>70 0</u>	<u>6.3</u>

Another striking and related feature of the figures in Table 1 is the great range in the incidence of teenage expenditure between different markets. In some their contribution is of major importance—it



accounts for at least 25 per cent of all consumer expenditure on bicycles and motor cycles, on records and record players and on cinema and other entertainments. In a second group of markets the teenage contribution, although relatively less, still ranges between 15 per cent and 25 per cent of the national total—confectionery, soft drinks, footwear, women's clothing, recreational and sports goods, and cosmetics. The use of cosmetics by the young women in the teenage population is heavy and widespread. A recent sample survey among them showed that less than 4 per cent made no use at all of these aids. On the contrary, in addition to the almost universal use of face powder and lipstick, 40 per cent apply nail varnish, 35 per cent embellish their eyes with mascara and 25 per cent also use eye shadow.

The obverse of this teenage dominance in some markets is, of course, the negligible impact of teenagers in others. In Table 1 the classification 'all other goods and services' is one that embraces almost two-thirds (62 per cent) of all consumer expenditure, and here teenage spending comes to less than 3 per cent of the total. It is a classification which in 1957 amounted to £8,810 millions and included, among others, household food, housing, fuel and light, motor cars, furniture, durable household goods, household textiles and fabrics, detergents, insurance and communication services. This area of spending, far and away the larger part of the economy, constitutes an almost totally adult set of markets and most of them, it will be noticed, are centred on the home.

There are two other adult markets where teenage expenditure is comparatively unimportant—tobacco and alcohol. The latest figures available from sample surveys show that 45 per cent of male teenagers do not smoke, and that less than 40 per cent take any alcoholic drink as often as once a week. Among girls, the abstainers are even more numerous—65 per cent do not smoke and less than 10 per cent have any alcohol as often as once a week.

Before considering some of the implications of this comparatively sharp division of the economy into teenage and adult markets, let us turn back to discuss in more detail various characteristics of the teenage market.

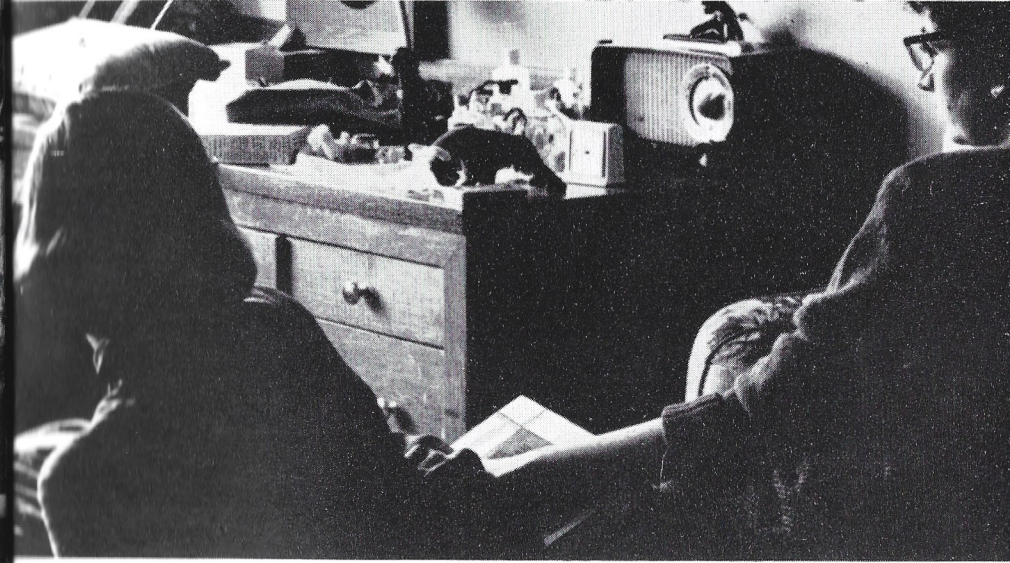
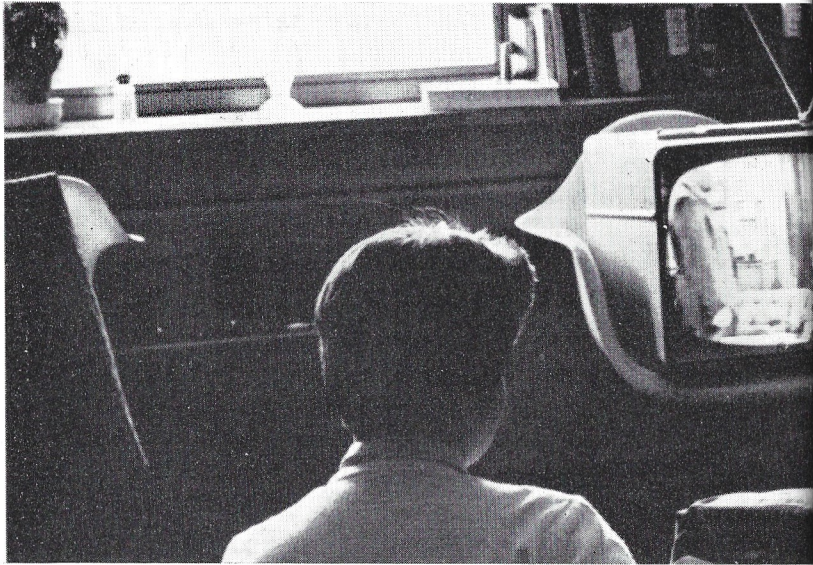
In the first place its occupational pattern is significantly and strikingly different from what it used to be.

In 1931, it would appear from the Census, a high proportion of adolescents were engaged in menial and often dead-end occupations—errand boys, tea-makers, van boys, farm servants, messengers, and, of course, domestic servants. In 1931 nearly one-third (31 per cent) of all





employed girls and young women under 25 years of age were engaged in personal service. Nowadays they are increasingly spending their working hours in jobs that require adult, industrial and literary skills, and the capacity to work with adults more or less as equals. The boys have moved, for example, into engineering and building, and the girls have become shop assistants, nurses, clerks and secretaries. Thus, in their jobs too, quite apart from their earnings, they have, economically, come much closer to being adults and much further from the subservient roles of the child. There is an increasing amount of evidence from sample surveys to suggest that the great majority of young people are well satisfied with their modern jobs. For example, a recent enquiry among young people aged 15 to 19 showed that in defining a 'good job' they placed most emphasis on three features—good wages, interesting



work to do, and pleasant workmates; and then 90 per cent said that, in fact, they did have pleasant workmates, 75 per cent said they had interesting work to do, and 64 per cent that they received good wages.

Secondly, as the foregoing shows, the teenage market is almost entirely working class. Its middle class members are either still at school and college or else only just beginning on their careers; in either case they dispose of much smaller incomes than their working class contemporaries and it is highly probable, therefore, that not far short of 90 per cent of all teenage spending is conditioned by working class taste and values. The aesthetic of the teenage market is essentially a



working class aesthetic and probably only entrepreneurs of working class origin will have a 'natural' understanding of the needs of this market.

A third characteristic of this market is its male strength—55 per cent of all teenagers are boys and young men, and at least 67 per cent of all teenage spending is in male hands.

The fourth point worth special notice is that the teenage market is highly mobile in its composition with a high wastage rate and a high recruitment rate. Of the current 5 million members, 450,000 or nearly 10 per cent will marry in the next 12 months, abandon their teenage spending habits and transfer their spending power to the very different adult market. To take their place in the teenage market the schools will, over the same period, provide a similar number of recruits who, on taking up jobs and earning money, will seek to learn teenage spending habits. In short, for the entrepreneur engaged in this market the pace never slackens; the teenage market has none of the comfortable inertia common to many adult markets.

Another characteristic of this group is that its patronage of the mass media is in some respects distinctive. The teenage population visits the cinema much more frequently than do its elders; it watches less television than does the rest of the population, and it tends to concentrate its reading on a few newspapers and magazines with very large general circulations.

*Cinema Visits.* Of all teenagers (as defined here, i.e. unmarried people aged 15 to 24), over 60 per cent visit the cinema at least once a week; among older people, on the other hand, going to the pictures is something of a rarity, and the great majority of them have no first-hand knowledge of the current films which fill a large proportion of the leisure time of teenagers.

<i>Frequency of cinema visiting</i>	<i>Teenagers</i>	<i>Rest of adult population</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Once or more a week	60	13
Once or twice a month	27	10
Less frequent	12	28
Never	1	49
Total	100	100

*Newspaper and magazine reading.* The reading habits of young people aged 16 to 24 (including the small minority who are married)



are heavily concentrated on a handful of publications, many of which devote a large part of their space to illustrations, comic strips, and 'human interest' news stories. The latest Readership Survey of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising relates to the 12 months ending December, 1958, and this, on the basis of a large nation-wide sample survey, shows that far and away the most widely read daily newspaper among these young people is the *Daily Mirror*—it reaches over two-fifths of them. At the week-end their reading attention is focused on the *News of the World* and the *Sunday Pictorial*—each read by approximately half all teenagers. Among general weekly magazines their outstanding favourites are *Reveille*, *Week-end*, *Titbits* and *Picturegoer*—comparatively few teenagers miss one or other of these in the average week; their reading of women's weekly publications is concentrated on *Woman* and *Woman's Own*.

Most of the newspapers and magazines already mentioned are comparatively long-established and their penetration outside the age group we are considering is very considerable. In addition, there are four fairly recently established weekly magazines which, while not as popular as the old favourites, seem to have made their mark particularly with the teenager; *Valentine*, *Roxy*, *Marilyn* and *Mirabelle*. While their penetration in other groups is slight, each of them already reaches approximately 13 per cent of these young people. Their common characteristic is indicated by the sub-title of *Valentine*—'Brings You Love Stories in Pictures'. In a random collection of recent



issues, the average page contained, apart from its drawings, slightly over 200 words broken up into 22 sentences.

The figures in Table 2 (quoted from the 1958 I.P.A. Survey) show, for each of four types of publication, the four most popular with teenagers; in many cases their relative appeal to teenagers is much the same as to the rest of the population, but there are a few noteworthy deviations: compared with their elders, rather more teenagers proportionately are attracted to the *Daily Mirror*, *News of the World*, *Sunday Pictorial* and all the eight listed magazines: in some of the last named the differences are striking.

*Table 2. Reading of Newspapers and Magazines  
Proportion in each group reading each publication*

	<i>Aged 16-24</i>	<i>Aged 25 and over</i>
	%	%
Daily Mirror	42	34
Daily Express	32	32
Daily Mail	14	16
Daily Herald	14	14
News of the World	54	47
Sunday Pictorial	48	38
People	38	37
Sunday Express	24	26
Reveille	40	21
Week-end	32	12
Titbits	19	10
Picturegoer	14	4
Woman	34	27
Woman's Own	33	25
Woman's Realm	17	9
Woman's Mirror	15	9

*TV Watching.* Two-thirds of the teenagers throughout Britain live in homes which contain a television set, and half of them have sets which can receive ITA programmes. These ratios are much the same for all adults, but compared with their elders, teenagers are comparatively abstemious in their viewing. For example, of all teenagers with multi-channel sets, 67 per cent watch ITA programmes for five



or more nights each week; but among their elders with multi-channel sets the proportion watching ITA programmes with this frequency is as high as 80 per cent.

This account of the teenager's patronage of the mass media points indirectly to a fifth characteristic of this section of the population. Unlike their elders they spend a comparatively large part of their leisure time outside the home. Most people over the age of 25, apart from going to work and doing the shopping (and sitting in motor cars at the week-end) see little point in moving outside their front door. In a recent nation-wide social survey when these people were interviewed, over 20 per cent of them said that apart from working and shopping they had not, during the previous seven days, gone out at all. On the other hand, most teenagers had been out on at least three occasions—usually to go to the pictures, to visit a friend, and to attend a meeting of some formally organized group.

*Table 3. Out-of-home activities (apart from work and shopping) over seven days*

<i>Outside activity on one or more occasions</i>	<i>Those aged 16-24</i>	<i>Rest of adults</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Went to cinema	65	20
Went to theatre, concert	7	5
Went to public houses	11	19
Went to dance	26	4
Visited friends, relations	53	39
Religious service	18	12
Played sports	10	2
Watched sports	7	6
Took walk, car drive	26	19
Attended meetings, clubs, classes	27	9
Other activities	22	11

Some of the main characteristics of today's teenage market, therefore, seem to be these: in numbers it is larger than ever before and its size will certainly increase considerably over the next few years—between now and 1969 the number of teenagers in Britain will increase by at least 20 per cent. Its real prosperity as judged by pre-war standards has risen dramatically; today it may well be double the 1938 level and judging by the high proportion of young teenagers going into







skilled manual and skilled white-collar jobs their real income per head may continue to rise faster than that of the rest of the population. The adult's pre-war monopoly of spending has been broken and cannot return. The spending of teenagers is concentrated on a comparatively narrow range of products and services so that the manufacturer who caters for them enjoys not only a prosperous market, but also one that is comparatively unaffected by large numbers of marginal adult spenders. The difficulties faced by the manufacturer, however, are not negligible. I will mention only four of these here.

First is the fact that even over a 12-month period the turnover of participant consumers is high and the manufacturer must be constantly addressing newcomers to the market.

Secondly, this is a working class market, and post-war British society has little experience in providing for prosperous working class teenagers; the latter have therefore, in shaping their consumption standards and habits, depended very heavily on the one industrial country in the world that has such experience, i.e. the United States. For various reasons it is difficult for the middle-aged British manufacturer to adopt the styles and language and appeals of American manufacturers concerned with the teenage market.

*look at  
western  
market  
page 2*

Third, the teenage market, in spite of the stability of its basic consumer needs, is highly volatile in accepting and rejecting particular goods to meet these needs. The manufacturer must gear himself both temperamentally and productively to accept, even to welcome and stimulate, frequent change.

Fourthly, the short teenage years between childhood and marriage are a period of intense pre-occupation with discovering one's identity, with establishing new relations with one's peers and one's elders, and with the other sex. In short, teenagers more than any other section of the community are looking for goods and services which are highly charged emotionally. To appreciate this is again something which is not easy for a middle-aged industrialist whose comparable enthusiasms and struggles took place in a world that died 30 or 40 years ago.

And even when the manufacturer succeeds in recalling the realities of teenage motives, he tends to see them in the symbol of his own youth, not of contemporary youth. In other words, he tends to clothe them in the styles, vocabularies, social institutions and personalities of 30 or 40 years ago—a period which for him is 'just a few years ago' (i.e. part of the present), but which for his teenage children is merely part of the







schoolroom sequence of labelled centuries. All of us at sometime or another are forced to recognise this difference between the generations in defining the past; that doesn't make it any the easier or less painful and most of us prefer to avoid the moment of recognition—even when we are producing for the teenage consumer. Few of us willingly accept the superannuation of our own ideas, values and experiences. Very few over 35 can find it at all easy to meet successfully the challenge of serving a teenage market.

Finally, for manufacturers concerned with adults, the present self-imposed and prosperous isolationism of the teenage market means that there is today a new problem of selling to ex-teenagers.

The consumer knowledge and habits that the teenager acquires between leaving school and getting married have in many fields of choice extremely little carry-over value into adult life. Discrimination and expertise in the consumption of chocolate bars, soft drinks, sports shirts, 'pop' records, dancing shoes, cosmetics, motor cycles, movies, drain-pipe jeans and romantic fiction have only the slightest relevance to the demands of adult life. On marrying, the ex-teenager starts almost from scratch to learn the consuming habits appropriate to the new role.

It is true that in this task the teenager is helped to some extent by the fact that both teenager and adult have access to the same mass media and therefore to the same advertising.

But the effect of this is very limited. The nature of a reader's dominant interests clearly determines the direction of his attention.

The specialized content of advertising in a few magazines catering principally for teenagers and even the effect of the films, the teenager's own special medium, fall short of explaining facts such as those brought to light in a survey carried out two years ago for Pearl & Dean Limited. A sample of unmarried women aged 20-24 (i.e. teenagers) was questioned about their knowledge of 12 widely used and widely advertised branded grocery lines (e.g. cooking fat, custard powder, self-raising flour, washing powder, canned soup) and asked, for each product, to name as many brands as they could. Their average score for all 12 products was only 2.02 brands; and but for the inclusion in the test of washing powders and detergents the score would have been appreciably lower.

There are, of course, other social institutions which play a part in initiating young people into the consuming habits of the adult world. One of these is the family and there is much evidence to suggest that

today the newly-married are heavily dependent on this source of guidance in those market choices of which as teenagers they had little experience. Thus, in the Pearl & Dean Survey already quoted it was found that among a sample of housewives under 25 years of age who used the 12 test grocery products, 60 per cent used the same brands as their mothers.

It is probably this turning back of newly-married working class girls to their mothers for standards and guidance which accounts for the conservatism of the British adult working class consumer market and its tenacious preference for certain goods and styles which were appropriate in the poverty-stricken 1930's but are far from necessary with today's working class prosperity. The influence of the past on contemporary working class consumption standards is documented afresh each year in the Government's National Food Survey which continues to indicate that the young working class housewife, while spending almost as much on food as does her middle class contemporary, still tends to fight shy of such 'modern' foods as fresh milk, cream, butter, eggs, fresh meat, fish and fresh fruit and vegetables; on the other hand, she seems to depend immoderately on the 'traditional' working class foods such as bread, potatoes and margarine. Increasingly, school doctors in working class areas are noting obesity among children and attributing this to prosperous but unimaginative young working class mothers who acquire feeding habits that were unavoidable in the depressed 1930's but are an anachronism today. The family-building trends of the past few years—early marriage and early maternity—have almost certainly strengthened this control exercised by the past over today's adult purses. In 1955, for example, nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of all first babies were born to women aged 25 or under and 60 per cent to women who had been married less than two years—in other words, to mothers who as consumers had barely emerged from the teenage world.

But there is one fact that may point towards the emergence among the young married generation of standards of choice more in line with mid-twentieth-century ideas. This is the changing content of the courses in evening classes run by local authorities. For 1957 there were over 3 million class entries in these institutes; the great majority of them were related to students' employment interests—mathematics, building, carpentry, engineering, shorthand and typewriting, etc., but a full 15 per cent were the entries of young women trying to learn for themselves about cooking, sewing and child-rearing.







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