

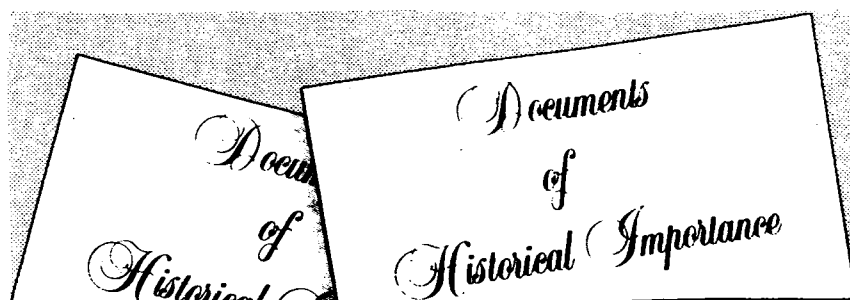
Teenage Consumer Spending 1959

Unmarried young people between the ages of 15 and 25

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TEENAGE CONSUMER SPENDING IN 1959

by Mark Abrams

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I have defined as teenagers those young people who have reached the age of fifteen but are not yet twenty-five years of age and are unmarried. On this definition, we had in Great Britain, at mid-1959, five million teenagers — 2¼ million boys and 2¼ million girls. Approximately four million of these (two million boys and two million girls) were at work in business and industry; the other one million were either still at school or college (650,000 of them), or in the Armed Forces (350,000).

Those at work are earning comparatively high wages and salaries. The semi-annual census of earnings carried out in October 1959 by the Ministry of Labour showed that the average male teenager in industry was then earning approximately £8 a week, and that the average girl's weekly earnings were £6. These were the average gross incomes of those employed in industry. For a complete picture of teenage wealth, allowance would have to be made for the lower cash incomes of those who are still at school and in the Armed Forces, and for the higher earnings — especially among girls — of those employed outside industry, i.e. in business offices, in the professions (e.g. school teaching), and in the 'service' occupations (e.g. hairdressing).

Again, allowance has to be made for the fact that teenagers in work will have deductions made from their earnings to meet their National Insurance and Income Tax obligations, and also that the average working boy pays his parents roughly 35 shillings a week for board and lodging, and that the average working girl contributes 25 shillings a week for these services.

After allowance has been made for these considerations (and also a small deduction made for true net savings — e.g. for marriage but not for holidays), it would seem that in 1959 the average male teenager (both employed and not employed) spent 71s. 6d. a week, and the average girl (both employed and not employed) spent 54 shillings. In other words, in 1959, Britain's five million teenagers, after meeting their State and family obligations, and after putting aside approximately £70 millions as true savings, spent £830 millions, or slightly over 5 per cent of the national total consumer expenditure.

At a first glance, this seems a very modest ratio for a group of people who constitute 10 per cent of the total population and 13 per cent of the population aged fifteen and over; it scarcely sustains a picture of an extremely prosperous body of young people. And yet this is the common view among most adults. They can justify their

view on two grounds: the fact that since the 1930s the real earnings of teenagers have risen much faster than those of adults, and secondly, that in some markets (e.g. clothing, cosmetics, soft drinks) teenage spending bulks so large that it almost determines the character and prosperity of the trade.

The figures of teenage expenditure given in Tables 1 and 2 are estimates calculated from various general consumer surveys carried out in the past eighteen months,

Table 1. Expenditure by Teenagers 1959

	All teenagers	% of total	Average teenager weekly	Teenage spending as % of all consumer spending
	£m. p.a.	%	s. d.	%
Chocolates, sweets, ice cream	30	3.6	2 3	10.7
Soft drinks, milk drinks	16	1.9	1 3	13.3
Meals out, snacks	76	9.2	5 10	14.6
Alcoholic drink	50	6.0	3 10	5.3
Cigarettes and tobacco	88	10.6	6 10	15.1
Clothing & footwear	160	19.3	12 3	10.6
Bicycles, motor cycles, etc.	26	3.1	2 0	37.1
Records, record players, etc.	17	2.0	1 4	42.5
Books, papers, magazines	26	3.1	2 0	10.9
Cosmetics, toilet preparations	22	2.7	1 8	29.3
Other chemists' goods	16	1.9	1 3	10.2
Recreational goods	30	3.6	2 4	18.2
Cinema admissions	20	2.4	1 7	28.2
Other entertainments	35	4.2	2 8	30.5
Holidays	58	7.0	4 6	12.9
All other goods & services	160	19.4	12 5	1.6
	830	100.0	64 0	5.3

including the Youth Marketing Survey of Market Investigations Ltd. They show a high degree of concentration. For example, nearly one-fifth of all teenagers' uncommitted money goes on clothing and footwear; another 17 per cent is spent on drink and tobacco, and another 15 per cent on

sweets, soft drinks, meals and snacks, etc. in cafés 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 dress 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.

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, on cosmetics and toilet preparations, and on cinema and other entertainments. In a second group of markets the teenage contribution, although relatively less, still ranges between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of the national total — confectionery, soft drinks, clothing and footwear, recreational and sports goods, books and magazines, and cigarettes.

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 (63 per cent) of all consumer expenditure, and here teenage spending comes to less than 2 per cent of the total. It is a classification which in 1959 amounted to £9,910 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 is one other major adult market where teenage expenditure is comparatively unimportant — alcohol. The latest figures available from sample surveys show that less than 40 per cent of male teenagers take any alcoholic drink as often as once a week. Among girls, the abstainers are even more numerous — less than 10 per cent have any alcohol as often as once a week.

The detailed figures in Table 1 relate to the spending of all teenagers. In Table 2 there is a broader picture of this spending by boys and girls and by middle class and working class teenagers.

The average boy spends 71s. 6d. a week; this is nearly one-third more than the weekly expenditure of 54s. by the average girl. At the same time male teenagers outnumber girl teenagers (by 5 to 4), and one consequence of these two

disparities is that male spending accounts for nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of all teenage spending. The average boy spends over 22 shillings a week (31 per cent of his total) on drinks, cigarettes and entertainment admissions. For the average girl, expenditure on these comes to only 7s. 6d., or less than 14 per cent of her total spending. On the other hand, she spends over a pound a week on clothes, shoes and cosmetics, and these items absorb nearly 40 per cent of her budget. The working class girl is much worse off than her middle class sister, spending only 47 shillings a week, as compared with the latter's 68 shillings — and her major economy is on footwear and clothes; even so, nearly a third (31 per cent) of her money goes on these items; for the middle class girl the proportion is 37 per cent. This substantial economic gap between middle class and working class girls shows no sign of diminishing.

Among boys there is only a slight difference in class expenditure and, what there is, is in favour of working class teenagers; with a total weekly outlay of 72 shillings they are two shillings better off than middle class boys. The patterns of spending of the two groups are broadly similar. Middle class teenagers spend a little more on drinks and clothing and a little less on cigarettes.

Perhaps the most striking social situation that emerges from Table 2 is that average middle class boys and average middle class girls have very much the same amount of money to spend; during adolescence they are economic equals. In contrast, in the working class the average boy has 50 per cent more than the average girl to spend; indeed, after the working class girl has paid for her clothes, shoes and cosmetics she is left with only 30 shillings a week — less than half of what the boy has after he has met the same needs. This disparity in spending power within the working class apparently persists throughout the teenage years. One consequence is that in the working class teenage world two-thirds of all spending is done by males, and if clothing and footwear are subtracted, then they account for three-quarters of the spending; economically, it is very much a male world.

At least in terms of teenage prosperity, the girl from a working class home who breaks into a white collar occupation experiences a much greater transition than does her brother making the same move.

There is one small but socially important market where, although teenage expenditure is comparatively modest, yet the character of this spending has received more than average public comment; this is the market for mass printed media. It will be seen from Table 3 that the average teenager reads 1.37 national daily newspapers each day. This is only a little more than that of the average adult aged 25 or more; but whereas 44 per cent of teenage newspaper reading is concentrated on the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch*, these two account for only 35 per cent of adult reading. On the other hand, among teenagers

Table 2. Weekly Teenage Expenditure by Class & Sex 1959
(in shillings)

	BOYS		GIRLS		All boys	All girls	All Middle class	All Working class	All teenagers
	Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Working class					
	s.	s.	s.	s.	s.	s.	s.	s.	s.
Food (inc. confectionery)	11.0	8.8	7.8	6.7	9.4	7.1	9.4	7.9	8.1
Drinks, soft and 'hard'	9.3	6.8	2.0	1.4	7.5	1.6	5.6	4.5	5.0
Cigarettes and tobacco	7.4	9.9	2.7	3.8	9.2	3.4	5.2	7.3	6.9
Clothing and footwear	8.3	7.2	24.9	14.6	7.8	18.0	16.6	10.4	12.3
Cosmetics, toilet preparations	0.4	0.9	3.0	2.5	0.8	2.7	1.7	1.7	1.7
Entertainment	5.3	5.5	2.3	2.5	5.4	2.4	3.8	4.3	4.2
Transport	8.7	6.1	9.0	5.5	6.8	6.7	8.8	5.8	6.8
All other goods and services	19.6	26.8	16.3	10.0	24.6	12.1	17.9	19.1	19.0
Total	70.0	72.0	68.0	47.0	71.5	54.0	69.0	61.0	64.0

Table 3. Reading of National Daily Newspapers
January — December, 1959
From the I.P.A. National Readership Survey

	Age group 16-24			Age group 25 and over		
	Middle class	Working class	Both	Middle class	Working class	Both
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Daily Mirror	27	52	44	22	41	35
Daily Express	35	26	29	34	30	31
Daily Mail	23	14	17	22	14	17
Daily Sketch	13	18	16	9	12	11
Daily Herald	6	13	11	6	17	13
News Chronicle	8	7	7	12	11	11
Daily Telegraph	16	2	7	19	2	8
The Times	11	1	4	6	1	3
The Guardian	6	1	3	5	1	2
Total of above	145	134	138	135	129	131

the *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald*, *News Chronicle*, and *Daily Telegraph* account for only 39 per cent of total reading, but among adults the share of these four rises to 48 per cent.

This teenage concentration on the tabloids and their relative rejection of text newspapers is a reflection of class differences; working class teenagers, compared with middle class teenagers, read fewer newspapers and 52 per cent of this reading is concentrated on the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch*. These two papers account for only 28 per cent of middle class teenage newspaper reading.

The contrast between teenage and adult reading is even more marked when we consider weekly magazines.

The magazines listed in Table 4 are the twelve most widely read by teenagers. Each week the average teenager reads at least two of them. With a little forcing they can be grouped into three main types:

- tabloids similar to the *Daily Mirror* (*Reveille*, *Weekend*, *Tit-Bits* and *Woman's Mirror*)
- love-comics (*Valentine*, *Marilyn*, *Mirabelle*, *Roxy*, *Romeo*)
- women's magazines offering both fiction and consumer guidance on clothes, cosmetics, cooking, etc. (*Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *Woman's Realm*)

The first group (*Reveille*, etc.) accounts for 40 per cent of the total teenage readership of the twelve magazines, and at least two-thirds of all teenagers read at least one of the three each week. The share of the second group (*Valentine*, etc.) amounts to 26 per cent, and at least 40 per cent of all teenagers read at least one of the *Valentine*,

Roxy type of magazine each week; the share of the third group (*Woman*, etc.) is 34 per cent of the total, and about 50 per cent of teenagers read at least one of them each week.

Teenage reading of these twelve magazines is double that of adults, but between the three groups the ratio of teenage to adult reading varies greatly. For the *Woman* type, there is almost equality — the rate of teenage coverage compared with adult coverage is roughly 4 to 3. Among *Reveille* type magazines, this ratio widens to 2 to 1, and then among love-comics it jumps to nearly 4 to 1.

The very high coverage (both absolutely and relatively) of *Reveille*, etc., and *Valentine*, etc., among teenagers is very largely due to their appeal to working class teenagers; in the normal week the average working class teenager reads between two and three of the twelve magazines, and of this high rate of reading three-quarters is made up of love-comics and *Reveille* type magazines. His (and her) level of reading these two types is nearly treble the level among middle class teenagers. In fact, the publications often described as typical teenage magazines (*Reveille* and *Valentine*) are really typical only of working class teenagers; they are largely without appeal for middle

Table 4. Reading of Weekly Magazines
January — December, 1959
From the I.P.A. National Readership Survey

	Age group 16-24			Age group 25 and over		
	Middle class	Working class	Both	Middle class	Working class	Both
	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>Reveille</i>	20	37	33	10	21	17
<i>Woman</i>	40	30	33	29	23	25
<i>Woman's Own</i>	34	29	30	24	22	22
<i>Weekend</i>	16	28	25	5	12	10
<i>Tit-Bits</i>	10	20	17	6	10	9
<i>Valentine</i>	5	18	15	1	3	3
<i>Woman's Mirror</i>	7	15	13	5	9	8
<i>Woman's Realm</i>	14	13	13	9	10	9
<i>Marilyn</i>	5	14	11	1	3	3
<i>Mirabelle</i>	4	14	11	1	3	2
<i>Roxy</i>	3	14	11	1	3	2
<i>Romeo</i>	3	12	10	—	3	2
Total of above	161	244	222	92	122	112

class boys and girls. This bias is so marked that almost any research on adolescence might well start by asking why working class young people on leaving school and starting adult life stand in such acute psychological need of what is provided by these publications.