"The Simpsons are Cool but Barbie's a Minger"

The role of brands in the everyday lives of Junior School Children

Agnes Nairn

Christine Griffin

Patricia Gaya Wicks

UNIVERSITY OF
BATH

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This report presents the results of the first two stages of an ongoing study conducted by researchers at the University of Bath into the role of brands in the everyday lives of junior school children (ages 7-11) in the UK. Stage 1 was completed in October 2004 and Stage 2 in July 2005. The focus of the research is understanding the meaning of brands *from the child's viewpoint.*

Agnes Nairn
School of Management

Christine Griffin
Department of Psychology

Patricia Gaya Wicks
School of Management

Contact: Dr Agnes Nairn
School of Management
University of Bath
Claverton Down
Bath, BA2 7AY
+44 1225 386202
a.c.nairn@bath.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

KEY FINDINGS

Stage 1

- At the time of data collection (October 2004) the children in our sample all wanted to talk about the following brand categories.

  1. Games Consoles (eg. X –Box, Game Cube and Play Station)

  2. Non-electronic interactive games (eg. Top Trumps, Pokemon Cards, Yugioh Cards and Beyblades)

  3. Dolls and Action Figures (eg. Barbie, Action Man and Bratz)

  4. TV programmes (eg. Simpsons, Ant and Dec, Dic and Dom in da Bungalow, Eastenders and Coronation Street)

  5. Celebrity Sports Stars (eg. David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Johnny Wilkinson)

  6. Celebrity Pop Groups (eg. Busted, McFly, Peter Andre, Britney Spears and Michael Jackson).

- The younger children were not able to recall a lot of specific brand names

- The children viewed branding and advertising - on one level - as just a very engaging game

- The children seemed to inhabit a seamless branded world where celebrities, toys, TV shows and electronics are almost indistinguishable

- When the children discussed whether brands were "cool" or "not cool" the process was strongly negotiated in the group

- The children in our study did not use branded clothing or shoes for symbolic purposes – in contrast to a lot of other research

- The children's brand discussions were highly gendered

Stage 2

- Stage 2 confirmed our stage 1 findings that, for the children, the notion of "cool" was indeed a complex and contradictory concept that didn't adhere to specific objects or people in any straightforward way

- The children used branded products to elaborate gender as a social construct where the masculine dominates

- Barbie aroused complex and violent emotions on the part of the children in our research

- The children showed great antipathy towards items which they saw as too heavily advertised or too blatantly marketed at them

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

DRAMATIC INCREASE IN MARKETING TO CHILDREN
Research has not kept apace

There has been a dramatic increase in and intensification of children's exposure to commercially sponsored media over the past several years (Myers, 2004; Verrept and Gardiner, 2000). 80% of UK children have a TV set in their bedrooms (ChildWise, 2005) and they spend an average of 4- 5 hours per day watching TV outside school hours (Cooke, 2002). Recent research shows that 80% of British children enjoy shopping, 71% care a lot about their games and other possessions, and 50% think brands are important (Mayo, 2005). Specific segments of children are now targeted directly by commercial organisations. In September 2005 Jamie Callum marketed directly to Head Girls of girls schools in the UK (Sherwin, 2005) and major organisations such as Procter and Gamble own databases of tens of thousands of influential children or "Connectors" who they turn into mini-marketers (Tremor, 2005).

The children's market in the UK alone is now estimated at £3bn for purchases made with children's own money and £30bn when child-influenced purchases are included (ChildWise, 2005).   Children are now a profitable target market in their own right and are the recipients of targeted marketing messages relayed direct to their bedrooms by TV, internet, SMS, video, magazines and radio.

However, our understanding of how children negotiate this intense world of brand symbols has not kept apace with these changes.

The primary objective of our research programme is to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of brands in the commercially-littered everyday lives of to-day's 7-11 year olds - *from the child's perspective.*

THE STUDY

We report here on the first two stages of our research programme.

- Stage 1 was designed to identify the products, brands and media influences which are meaningful to children aged 7/8 and 10/11.

- These age groups represent the youngest and oldest classes in British junior schools

- In stage 1 we held group discussions with 72 children (12 groups of 6 children). The groups were drawn in equal numbers from Year 3 (age 7/8) and Year 6 (age 10/11) in two different schools.

- We chose these two schools (one private and one state) in order to recruit children from a range of social and economic backgrounds.

- In each school a third of the groups were girls only; a third boys only and a third mixed gender.

- Stage 2 was designed to explore in depth the meanings that these identified products, brands and media influences hold for the children.

- In stage 2 we facilitated depth discussions with a further 56 children (16 groups of 3 or 4 children) from the same year groups of the same schools.

- Stage 2 also included a group sorting task – where the children decided together how to place the brands on a cork board labeled "cool" on one side and "not cool" on the other.

- 8 groups were drawn from each school: 4 from each year group. A quarter of groups were girls only, a quarter boys only and half mixed gender.

STAGE 1

STAGE 1 – OBJECTIVES

The major objective of stage 1 was to identify which products, brands and media influences were meaningful to these children. We had 3 over-riding criteria in designing this stage:

1. We wanted to ensure that the products, brands and media influences studied were those which *children* saw as meaningful rather than objects that we as *adult* researchers thought would be meaningful to children.

2. We wanted to understand how children themselves construct meaning from consumption objects. (Previous research had concentrated on testing whether children can interpret the adult world or whether the meanings which children assign to consumption objects change as they grow older)

3. We wanted to explore how the children reacted in groups rather than individually. (It has struck us as unsatisfactory that whilst the process of assigning meanings to objects is a deeply social process, previous research has focused almost exclusively on children's individual interpretations of brands).

STAGE 1 – DISCUSSION THEMES

Whilst trying not to impose our ideas on the children, the researchers guided the discussions through a series of 5 set stages:

1. First, children were collectively asked to brainstorm a list of *"the things kids in your class are into at the moment".* These were written on a flip chart.

2. Second, the children were asked to generate as many brand names as they could for the objects on the flip chart.

3. Third, they were asked which words they would use to classify the various brands into either a negative or positive category.

4. Fourth, they were asked to classify the objects and brands which they had generated into two columns, a negative and positive, using their preferred words.

5. Fifth, they were asked to brainstorm and classify TV programmes, celebrities, pop stars, styles, adverts, hairstyles, jewellery and magazines.

STAGE 1 - ANALYSIS

With permission from parents and children, all discussions were taped and transcribed. Our dataset consisted of the lists of *"things kids are into"*; the lists of brands; the lists classifying brands and media influences; and the transcriptions of the children's discussions.

The two researchers working on this part of the project independently analysed the scripts, lists and flip charts. We were looking for the brands and media influences which were mentioned most consistently across groups and which generated excitement, interest and debate i.e. those which form solid social currency for these junior school children. We were also looking for preliminary insights into how children use brands. We primarily used qualitative thematic analysis guided by an appreciation of quantitative aspects of the data (such as frequency of mentions).

STAGE 1 - FINDINGS

What are 7-11 year olds into?

For the British junior school children in our study in October 2004, six types of items were most often mentioned in the group discussions and generated the most excitement and debate within the groups:

1. Games Consoles (eg. X –Box, Game Cube and Play Station)

2. Non-electronic interactive games (eg. Top Trumps, Pokemon Cards, Yugioh Cards and Beyblades)

3. Dolls and Action Figures (eg. Barbie, Action Man and Bratz)

4. TV programmes (eg. Simpsons, Ant and Dec, Dic and Dom in da Bungalow, Eastenders and Coronation Street)

5. Celebrity Sports Stars (eg. David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Johnny Wilkinson)

6. Celebrity Pop Groups (eg. Busted, McFly, Peter Andre, Britney Spears and Michael Jackson).

The consistency with which these categories were mentioned and discussed allowed us to feel confident that these were the things which were truly meaningful to children of this age and these categories were therefore used for the in-depth discussions in stage 2.

STAGE 1 – ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Although the major point of stage 1 of the research was to identify products and brands which were truly meaningful to children (for use in stage 2 of the research) a number of additional surprising and interesting findings also emerged unbidden from the children's discussions:

- Despite all that we read about "media savvy youth", the younger children we talked to were actually not able to recall a lot of specific brand names

- The children viewed branding and advertising - on one level - as just a very engaging game

- The children seemed to inhabit a seamless branded world where celebrities, toys, TV shows and electronics were almost indistinguishable

- When the children discussed whether brands were "cool" or "not cool" the process was strongly negotiated in the group

- The children in our study did not use branded clothing or shoes for symbolic purposes – in contrast to a lot of other research

- The children's brand discussions were highly gendered

These findings are explored in more detail below.

STAGE 1 – ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

1. **The Younger Children Couldn't Recall Many Brand Names**
    In line with previous research, a comparison of the lists and discussions of the 7/8 year olds with the lists and discussions of the 10/11 year olds showed that children develop knowledge of the concept of branding as they grow older. Thus the 7/8 year olds found it almost impossible to think of the names of brands for the particular items they had listed on the flip charts. The specific names of brands were not salient in their minds and many were very unsure what was meant by the term "brand" – even after they had been given an example such as "Cadbury's is a brand of chocolate". In one of the younger groups, TV sets were cited as a product which "kids are into". They were thus asked to generate a list of TV brands. They did list 'real' brand names such as Sony, Panasonic and Toshiba. However, their list also included Curry's (a retailer), Teletext and Sky. It is worth noting that the tape recorder in front of them during the discussion was Sony and there was a Panasonic TV in the classroom. Thus it may be that the group could only name one brand spontaneously.

    Whilst this misattribution of brands to product categories was more prevalent in the younger groups, it was also surprisingly common amongst the older children. For example, when a Year 6 group was asked to list brands of games consoles (e.g. Sony Playstation, Microsoft X-Box, Nintendo Game Cube) the children also listed gaming software brands (Atari, E.A. Games); specific games (Mario, Fifa Football); and PC brands such as HP and Dell. Amongst the games console lists we also found brand

names for other products that children clearly associate with playing on consoles such as Telewest Broadband, Windows, Sky and XP, whilst lists of computer brands included Ebay, PC World, Dixon's and Intel Pentium.

Thus it seems that on a very fundamental level children do not understand the function of a brand in the way intended by marketers nor are these functions necessarily "acquired" as children get older. A different process is at work. This becomes more apparent when we consider the role which celebrities and TV shows play in the lives of children. This is considered in the next section.

2. **The Seamless Branded World of Celebrities, TV Shows, Toys and Electronics**

We were surprised that the most resonant discussions did not centre around children's toys and games - what we might term conventional children's products and brands - but around sports celebrities, pop stars and stars on TV shows. These were people and groups of people whom children clearly regard as imbued with social symbolism. Whilst TV programmes, sports stars and pop groups are not products in the strictest sense, we have classified them together with objects such as Play Stations and Barbie for Stage 2 of the research because children clearly treat them symbolically in the same way.

Research and press commentary has tended to treat the influence of TV programmes, advertising and celebrities as phenomena which are quite separate from products and brands that are bought and sold such as Nike or Coke.   However, it was quite clear from our stage 1 research results that children classify products and brands in a quite different way from the way it is often assumed in adult writing about children and brands. To-day's 7-11 year olds have inhabited, since birth, a world where toys have their own TV programmes and internet sites; football players have their own range of clothing in department stores; and TV characters (whether real or cartoon) are found in retail outlets on a selection of merchandised products. The way in which they use brands is deeply embedded in the commercial media culture which they have experienced all their lives.

It is also worth noting that the items which the children wanted to talk about in our study are almost without exception those which are backed by a cross-media marketing function. A child might watch a Beyblades cartoon on the television and may play with a Pokemon game on a Playstation. The Simpsons appear on Top Trump cards and on an X-Box game as well as on TV. David Beckham appears not only playing football for England, but in sports magazines, electronic games and on Marks and Spencer clothing. And what emerges from stage 1 of our research is a picture of to-day's junior school children inhabiting a seamless world of media and commercial stimuli in which games, people, music and toys fulfil parallel, interlinked and complementary functions.

3. **The Brand and Advertising Game**

Even if children could not name brands for the items of interest to them, they delighted in the game of listing brand names and volunteered inventories of brands for product categories not covered in the first exercise. This resulted in 30 brands of car generated by one Year 6 mixed group and the mobile phone brands Vodaphone, Orange, Nokia and O2 being reeled off fluently and without hesitation by a group of

Year 3 girls. It therefore seems that branding is an engaging topic for junior school children although, even by Year 6, they do not share an adult's understanding of brands and their notion of branding may be far from that intended by marketers.

Likewise, almost 100 different adverts were mentioned across the 12 groups. Recall of adverts was spontaneous, quick and prolific. From the discussions it was clear that children engage with the creative execution of the advertising itself rather than making explicit associations with any product message being put across. Many favourite adverts were for products not aimed at children. For example, John Smith's beer advertising was enjoyed by many although one hopes that few have already developed a taste for the drink. Children in all groups were able to describe adverts in minute detail and to give very polished performances of songs, jingles or slogans.

This reinforces the observation that children's perceptions of product categories, branding and media influences do not necessarily follow the assumptions that pervade most current research, media commentary and adult 'common sense' ideas about children's relationship to consumer goods. Products, brands, retailers, software, hardware, adverts, people and games inhabit an interconnected space in children's minds.

4. Classifying Brands: A Highly Negotiated Process

Before asking the children to discuss their views of the products and brands they had listed, we asked them what words they would use to sort objects into a "good" or "bad" pile. We wanted to make sure the children were able to use their own terminology. We did not wish to impose our vocabulary which might be seen as outdated and irrelevant.

The words used by children to classify brands did vary slightly by age, with older children having a much wider range of classificatory vocabulary than younger ones. Younger groups were often happy with "good" and "bad" whereas older groups were more experimental with their vocabulary. The most frequently used positive words across the groups were "quality", "cool" and "radical" and the words used for something negative were "minging", "pants", "sad" or "rubbish". Each group independently chose a pair of words to use for the classification exercise. Thus some groups used "quality" and "minging" whilst others used "cool" and "sad".

What was more interesting than the specific choices of words was that each group – even the older ones – was perfectly happy to interchange a range of classificatory terms and there did not seem to be particular symbolism or kudos attached to using one or other word. There was not a "cool hierarchy" of vocabulary, at least among the children we interviewed. This was surprising to us as we had thought that using the "right" word might be important to this age group in the way it is for teenagers.

However, in line with a strong and consistent finding from analysing the classification exercises, this appears to be symptomatic of the way in which children mobilise brands to fulfil a variety of social functions. For when children were asked to classify the brands on their lists, there was rarely clear cut consensus as to what was "quality" and what was "minging". Instead there was a great deal of debate as to which column a brand should be assigned to. There was no sense that some objects were automatically "cool" and some were not. Instead, the majority of groups very quickly created a middle column – neither "sad" nor "cool" but in between. This indicates

that there may be no agreed notion of what is "cool for 7-11 year olds". Our findings indicate that the process (when viewed from the children's perspective) is much more negotiated than this. This theme was explicitly developed in the design of stage 2 and is reported in Stage 2 Findings below.

5.   Branded Clothes Not A Major Discussion Topic

It is worth noting the almost total absence of clothes and shoes as a focus for discussion. In particular, trainers or jeans barely figured on any lists. This was striking as in addition to the myriad column inches which have been devoted to the ubiquitous marketing of Nike and its rivals, a number of academic studies have also highlighted the importance which children assign to the "right" brand of trainers and jeans (e.g. Elliot and Leonard, 2004). Perhaps it is adults who think trainers and jeans are important rather than the children themselves, at least for the children we interviewed.

6.   Gender: Boys Rule

Finally, we were very struck by the highly gendered nature of the discussions in every group. The concept of gender was repeatedly mobilised in order to negotiate, discuss and classify brands. Most notably the notions of "girly" and "babyish" were used in an almost interchangeable way, indicating that from the age of 7 (and probably younger) children are already infantilising the feminine. Whilst girls were comfortable in admitting that they played with what the group considered a "boys' toy", no boy would admit to playing with a "girls' toy" thus showing that implicit in their thinking, boys are considered not just different to girls but somehow superior socially. This theme emerged even more strongly in stage 2 and is reported in Stage 2 Findings below.

STAGE 1 – CONCLUSIONS

The discussions with children in stage 1 generated a list of brands which children see as meaningful. These were used as discussion stimuli in stage 2. We were confident that the stage 2 discussions would revolve around items which resonate for children and not around items which adults *think* are meaningful for children.   Stage 1 also presented us with some initial insight into how brands operate in the everyday lives of children in junior schools. The junior school world of brands is a world where products themselves merge seamlessly with the adverts and celebrities which promote them and the electronic media through which they are experienced. It is world where symbolic functions of brands are mobilised in a manner which is often playful but is also highly negotiated and deeply gendered.

STAGE 2

STAGE 2 – OBJECTIVES

Stage 2 took place 6 months after stage 1. We returned to the same schools and talked with children from the same age groups (although not necessarily the same children). We again used small group discussion settings for our data collection, but this time the group sizes were smaller consisting of 3 or 4 children. We decided to use smaller groups as 6 would have been too many for the sorting task. Again, half of the children were age 7/8 (year 3) and half 10/11 (year 6). A quarter of the groups were girls only, a quarter boys only and half mixed gender. In total, 16 discussions with a total of 56 children were held in a quiet room in each school. Parental permission was gained for children to take part and for the discussions to be both taped and videoed. Digital photographs of the results of the sorting task were also taken.

The purpose of stage 2 was to explore the meanings of brands in greater depth. This time we had four over-riding criteria in the design of the research:

1) We again wanted to ensure that the products, brands and media influences studied were those which *children* saw as meaningful rather than objects that we as *adult* researchers thought would be meaningful to children. We imposed no suggestions for brands on the discussions.

2) We again wanted to understand how children themselves construct meaning from consumption objects. (Previous research had concentrated on testing whether children can interpret the adult world or whether children of different ages assign the same fixed meaning to consumption objects.) We made no suggestions for how particular brands might be viewed by others.

3) We again wanted to explore how the children reacted in groups rather than individually. (Whilst the process of assigning meanings to objects is a deeply social process, children's individual interpretations have been the focus of previous research).

4) In Stage 2 we also wished to explore in greater depth the complex group negotiation process we observed in stage 1 when children were deciding whether items were "cool" or "not cool". This was important as this "negotiation process" is not something which has been reported from other research.

STAGE 2 – ITEMS USED AS STIMULI FOR DISCUSSION

Stage 1 had served to identify 6 categories of items which children "are into". From these categories we identified the 12 specific items which were most consistently mentioned across groups and which generated the most lively interest from the children.

These are a mix of toys, games, TV shows and celebrities and are listed below:

1. **Busted**. A boy band marketed at children. Split up in 2005.

2. **McFly**. Another boy band marketed at children. Launched after Busted and still going.

3. **Britney Spears.** Twenty something singer, popular with children.

4. **David Beckham.** Celebrity England football player. Married to Victoria, "Posh Spice."

5. **The Simpsons.** Popular American cartoon TV show aimed at adults.

6. **Barbie.** Fashion doll which has been marketed for over 40 years.

7. **Bratz.** New series of fashion dolls marketed specifically at tweens.

8. **Action Man.** Action figure which has been marketed for several decades.

9. **Yu-Gi-Oh.** Trading card game which originated in Japan.

10. **Beyblades.** Small spinning tops which are used to fight against other children's tops.

11. **Pokemon.** Another Japanese trading card game. Has been around longer than Yu-Gi-Oh

12. **Games Consoles** (Playstation, X-Box, Game Cube). Interactive electronic games which are plugged into the TV.

In order to facilitate discussion, pictures of these items were produced. They were all created in A4 size and all set against a white background.

STAGE 2 – DISCUSSION THEMES

Using the stimuli which had been generated by the children in Stage 1 the discussion in Stage 2 proceeded in two parts.

- The first stage was introduced by the researcher as follows: *"You may know that some people that I work with came to your school before Christmas to speak to children in your year about things that you think are cool and not cool, ok. And we've come up with this set of things that were the most talked about, and what I am going to do today is show you pictures of these things and I want you to tell me what you think of them. Is that ok? So you have to tell me whether you think they are cool or not cool and so on."*

- The children were shown an A4 sized picture of each of the stimuli – one at a time. For each picture the interviewer encouraged the children to explain and expand their views.

- The second stage consisted of a group-sorting task. A cork-board was set up and labelled "cool" on one side and "not cool" on the other. The children were handed small versions (6cm by 6cm) of the product and people pictures and asked to decide as a group where they should be placed on the board. Once they had agreed, the children pinned the pictures onto the board.

STAGE 2 - ANALYSIS

Our dataset consisted primarily of the transcripts and videos of the children's discussions of the 12 items and the commentary which accompanied the sorting task. The videos were particularly useful for analysing the latter as we could observe the body language of the children and the way in which different groups of children used the board. We also photographed the final positions of the pictures on the cork board.

The 3 researchers involved in this part of the analysis independently analysed the scripts, videos and photos. We all used a qualitative thematic analysis approach. Then we came together and compared the themes which emerged to produce a valid triangulated set of themes. The key themes are presented in the next section.

STAGE 2 – FINDINGS

Analysis of this data has provided a rich picture of a world where children use people and products symbolically in a number of ways.

- For the children, the notion of "cool" was indeed a complex and contradictory concept that didn't adhere to specific objects or people in any straightforward way

- The children use branded products to elaborate gender as a social construct where the masculine dominated.

- Barbie aroused complex and violent emotions on the part of the children in our research

- The children showed great antipathy towards items which they saw as too heavily advertised or too blatantly marketed at them

We discuss each of these issues below.

1. Cool – a complex and contradictory phenomenon

In Stage 2 we specifically built on the finding from stage 1 that coolness for this group of children was a highly negotiable concept. Thus we not only framed the discussions in terms of whether the stimuli were viewed as 'cool' or not, but also devised the cork-board exercise to examine the process by which children of this age come to an agreed conclusion on the coolness of the brands.

When we asked the children to do the cork-board exercise, 14 out of the 16 groups mobilised a middle category between the two points. This happened in spite of the fact that no such option was offered by the researcher and the space between the "cool" end and "not cool" end of the board was a blank area, not demarcated in any way. In the short and typical exchange reported below we can see that some children felt the need to establish the middle option even before the task had begun:

Interviewer	*Yes, all of you decide together where you want to put it. That's the cool side, this is the not cool side.*
Girl	*Is there a middle side?*

Year 6, Private School, Mixed Group

This behaviour shows that cool is not a binary phenomenon which can be switched on and off, but rather that the negotiation over whether an item should be categorised as cool was extremely complex and was enmeshed in the power play and group dynamics both of the small group we were talking to, the school class to which they belong and to consumer culture as a whole.

First of all we examined the ways in which the middle point on the board was used and then built upon this through an examination of both discussions and the cork board exercise to extrapolate the meanings which the concept of cool has for these children.

The "Middle Side"

Analysis of the cork board exercise videos, photos and discussions revealed that this "middle side" was used in 3 main ways:

- Firstly to solve any potential difficulties arising if there was no consensus about where to place an item

- Secondly in order to be 'fair' and reflect all shades of opinion

- Thirdly the middle category was sometimes used when the line between 'cool' and 'non-cool' was treated as a continuum.

Each of these ways is exemplified and expanded below:

Resolving Conflict

This use of the middle column to solve a lack of consensus is summed up well by a group of year 3 girls about X-Box.

Girl 1   *Jenny thinks that they should go in the middle but we think they should go at the end so we think it's fair to put them in the middle*

Girl 2   *so we're kind of doing a vote*

Year 3, Private School, Girls Group

This sense of cool somehow being a democratic process is illuminated in more depth in the following quite lengthy exchange about McFly in a Year 3 mixed group.

Boy 1   *McFly. Cool.*

Girl 1   *Not cool.*

Boy 2   *Cool.*

Boy 1   *Ok, that's three against one. Sorry it's cool.*

Boy 2   *Lauren? (asking her to confirm agreement that McFly is cool).*

Girl 2   *What?*

Girl 1   *Why don't we put it in the middle coz some people don't like it*
.
Girl 2   *Um that can be kind of more people like it than any body else (indicating, in fact, yet another point between the middle and the cool side)*

Boy 1   *Yeah.*

Interviewer   *Ok, so you're basically down the middle with the things that some people...*

Girl 1   *Half, half.*

Girl 2   *They're kind of 50/50*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Here we can see how the space on the board is used to solve issues of consensus. The two boys think McFly is cool and one of the girls thinks they are not cool. The first boy takes ownership of the second girl's opinion without her having spoken *("OK that's three against one")*. However he then recants and seeks her agreement. She pretends not to know what he's getting at as she probably feels disloyal to the other girl *("what?")* at which point the first girl suggests that they compromise *("why don't we put it in the middle coz some people don't like it.")* This idea of agreement is clearly appealing to the children as the first girl immediately suggests using the board to show three levels of consensus: unanimity (on the cool or not cool side); equally divided opinion (the middle point); and majority consensuses *("kind of more people like it* (or don't like it) *than anybody else)* and the first boy is quite ready to agree.

Thus we can see that coolness seems to be linked partly to the idea of "strength in numbers": if enough people like something, it's cool. Some of the children demonstrated quite an aggressive interpretation of this notion with those in the majority being seen as "winners" with more rights than the others. This discussion in another year group (also about McFly) illustrates this well:

Boy 1   *McFly. How many of us don't like McFly, raise your hand*

Girl 1   *like*

Girl 2   *I like them a bit. They're OK*

Boy 1   *so a bit, so that's two and a half against one and a half, we win, thank you, we get to put it anywhere*

Year 6, State School, Mixed Group

Here boy 1 does not like McFly and wants the pictures placed on the not cool end of the board. He elicits opinions and then interprets them using a numerical system where *"liking them a bit"* is given the value of a half. Having made his calculation he announces triumphantly, *"we win, thank you, we get to put it anywhere".* Here we can see the coolness of a brand being used to justify the dominance of one group over another.

Reflecting Shades of Opinion

Sometimes, however, the children's decisions about cool included opinions of people beyond the small group doing the exercise. Thus in one discussion the children agree to put David Beckham in the middle because although as a group they don't think he is cool they are aware that there are other people who do like him.

Girl 1	*David Beckham.*
Girl 2	*Not cool.*
Girl 3	*Nearer (indicating that he should not be placed directly under "not cool" like some of the other items but in the middle), I think some people still like him.*

Year 6, Private School, Girls Group

Other groups elaborated on this to refer to specific types of other people who had different opinions to their group. For example, for this group of year 6 state school girls the coolness of Bratz depended on what age you are:

Girl 1	*Bratz,*
Girl 2	*They're quite cool, they're probably about there. (And she places them close to the cool sign on the left but further right -less cool - than some of the other items)*
Girl 1	*Yeah. Well it depends what age group you're looking for.*

Year 6, State School, Girls Group

This sentiment is elaborated further by a group of year 6 state school boys

Boy 1	*For our age Barbie's not cool, but for young people, and I think, I think we should move Action Man as well coz I think for younger ones... (Barbie and Action Man are moved from the not cool side into the middle)*
Boy 2	*Yeah.*
Boy 1	*Ok, so Action Man and Barbie...*
Boy 2	*They're considered cool for young people, but not considered cool for older people.*
Interviewer	*Ok, fine.*
Boy 3	*So for our age it's, they're not cool, but for younger people they certainly are.*

Year 6, Private School, Boys Group

Other groups wished to acknowledge that perception of coolness was also a function of gender. This is exemplified in this short exchange about Britney Spears between a boy and a girl in one of the Year 6 Mixed State School groups

> **Boy**   *Maybe in the middle.*
>
> **Girl**   *Well, it depends if you're a boy or a girl really.*
>
> **Year 6, State School, Mixed Group**

In this conceptualisation, the perception of cool is not seen as a function of majority rule but as a function of whoever beholds the brand – thus the cool status of a brand changes depending on the age or gender of the person making the judgement.

The Cool/Not Cool Continuum

The discussions around the third use of the "middle side" – to designate a point on the cool/not cool continuum - provided us with rich data on the dimensions of cool from the child's point of view. We combined the comments made during the cork board exercise with the general group discussions to tease out a variety of distinct bipolar meanings of cool for our children. What emerged from our analysis were three quite diverse and distinct meanings of cool which were consistently used across the different groups of children:

- Cool and Entertainment. Coolness could be linked to entertainment (or its opposite, boredom) or represented as different to a commodity that was seen as entertaining

- Cool and Popularity. Coolness was associated with the popularity of an object cool but could also be represented as something exclusive

- Cool and Fashion. Coolness was connected with objects that were viewed as fashionable, or as currently in fashion, yet views of what was fashionable were hotly contested.

"Entertainment", "Popularity" and "Fashion" emerged as related and overlapping but distinct discourses associated with the concept of coolness, and were characterised by contradictory elements.   The following sections elaborate on each of these discourses.

Cool is Entertainment / Not Cool is Boredom

For most of the groups of children a number of the items were considered cool if they were entertaining. This discussion of Playstation is a typical example:

Interviewer	*Playstation. What do you think, cool or not cool?*
Boy 1	*Cool.*
Interviewer	*Cool? Why?*
Boy 2	*Coz...*
Boy 1	*Er, because, er you can like play games instead, you can like, you can and it doesn't take ages to set up like the computer and stuff.*
Boy 2	*And, um, it's really amusing and stuff.*
Interviewer	*it's amusing. And what do you think Jeremy?*
Boy 3	*Well it gives you entertainment really, coz like it would be like a bit boring if you didn't have any sort of well, electronic games or anything in your house.*

Year 3, Private School, Boys Group

In the cork board exercise the games consoles were classified as cool by every single group – invariably because the children simply really enjoyed playing on them: they were fun. In the discussion above we see "entertainment" conceptualised as at the same time "amusing" and also as the antithesis of "boring".   Both of these notions were used across the groups. The notion of amusing was particularly linked to the Simpsons which were also classified on the boards as cool by every single group of children we talked to.

Interviewer	*So what makes it cool? What makes The Simpsons cool? They've been around a long time.*
Girl 1	*It's funny.*
Girl 2	*It's just, yeah, it's completely random. It's actually normal life, you just watch like randomly normal life and it is completely random.*
Interviewer	*Ok.*
Girl 1	*It's really funny. I like it coz it's funny and it's a cartoon.*

Year 6, Private School, Girls Group

The usage of "boring" as the antithesis of cool was particularly prevalent amongst the Year 3 children (although not exclusive to this age group). These examples illustrate:

> **Interviewer**   *OK, OK, great we'll go onto the next one then, what about Action Man?*
>
> **Children groan and say no**
>
> **Girl**   *Boring, boring, boring now*
>
> **Year 3, State School, Mixed Group**

> **Girl 1**   *Yogioh cards. I started playing with them then I saw Pokemon cards and I started playing with them, then they just got a bit boring, cause I kept playing with them and then I realised they, they were really, really dull*
>
> **Interviewer**   *OK and what about you Melissa? What do you think?*
>
> **Girl 2**   *um, well, if you play with them, um, I always know cause you keep playing with exactly the same card over and over and over and over, once you've played like, ten times, you've probably got so bored that you don't play and then you just have to go out and buy more stuff and it'll happen again and again and again and again*
>
> **Year 3, Private School, Girls Group**

This idea of boredom and ennui is interpreted by some as a result of comparing old "stuff" to new "stuff".

> **Girl**   *I do actually like Bratz a bit but I, um, just gone a bit off them, even though I got two dolls*
>
> **Interviewer**   *Why have you gone off them?*
>
> **Girl**   *I don't know, cause, now like, um, cause I've got new stuff and you just play with them more, you just, till you get used to them*
>
> **Year 6, State School, Mixed Group**

Yet although all groups assigned games consoles and The Simpsons to the cool side of the board, because of their entertainment value there were some children (notably in Year 6) who thought that "entertainment/funny" and "cool" were distinct concepts. The two were hard to disentangle as the following exchange reveals.

Boy 1	*Um, some people would like, like, there's some people I know who won't think they're cool but it's just like, they're sort of like and funny and they like them.*
Interviewer	*Yeah. And so there's a difference between cool and funny?*
Boy 1	*Yeah.*
Boy 2	*Yeah.*
Interviewer	*Yeah.*
Girl 1	*Like The Simpsons, they're funny, they're like, like, in like, in thirds, they'd be like two thirds funny and one third cool.*

Year 6, State School, Mixed Group

The children seem to agree that there is a difference between cool and funny but they are not quite sure what it is or how to conceptualise it or express it. Another Year 6 group suggested that the notion of cool was associated with what people display (e.g. the clothes they wear) rather than simply what people play with at home. This time they are talking about Games Consoles.

Interviewer	*Ok, so would you say that these are cool? Is this something that you would say is cool?*
Boy	*Um, I dunno, I just think it's quite alright, it's not like cool, coz, I dunno, because I'd class something as cool as maybe a piece of clothing if you walk around, that's not exactly like you'd carry that around with you, so. I dunno, I just think they're like fun. Fun rather than cool.*

Year 6, Private School, Boys Group

Thus whilst all of the children would talk of the things that entertain them (particularly games consoles and The Simpsons) as cool there is an awareness by Year 6 that there is some other phenomenon which is called cool which they don't quite understand yet although they have an inkling that it may be about what you display to the outside world.

Cool is Popular – But Sometimes Cool is Not Too Popular

We saw from the negotiations over the cork board that the children often classified things as cool if the majority of people liked them. The assignment of a cool badge was seen as a democratic process like viewers phoning in to vote on the Eurovision Song Contest or Strictly Come Dancing. Thus cool was linked not to individual preference but to a kind of mass approval or popularity.

> *Boy 1*   *Playstation cool.*
>
> *Boy 2*   *Coz so many people have got it, and so many people love it.*
>
> **Year 6, Private School, Boys Group**

However, there was also a feeling amongst groups of children that if too many people liked something then it lost its cool cachet, as illustrated by this discussion of Pokemon by some Year 3 boys.

> *Boy*   *Pokemon's not bad.*
>
> *Interviewer* *Uh-huh.*
>
> *Boy 2*   *It's sort of, well, coz*
>
> *Boy 3*   *Peekachuu!*
>
> *Boy 2*   *Um, loads of people have got them so it's not really cool anymore.*
>
> **Year 3, State School, Boys Group**

Thus cool has an ambivalence. An item is only cool when it gains approval by a critical mass of people, yet when too many people accept it, it becomes boring and loses its cool. This is linked to the way in which the children conceptualised fashionability and is elaborated below.

Cool is Fashionable – and Fashion is Recycled

The children mobilised the notion of fashion to explain why some items were or were not cool. This discussion on Action Man is a typical example:

Interviewer	*Ok. Well, what would boys in your year think? Would they think Action Man is cool?*
Girl 1	*No.*
Girl 2	*No. They'd think it's like uncool.*
Girl 3	*They'd think, no, it's just so out of fashion.*

Year 6, State School, Girls Group

Thus cool equals in fashion. However, the children – even by year 3 – also understood that nothing can remain popular for long stretches of time. This discourse was explored particularly in relation to the celebrities.

Interviewer	*Ok, great. Ok we'll move onto the next one then. Britney Spears.*
Boy 1	*Not cool.*
Girl 1	*Not cool.*
Interviewer	*Ok so one at a time, Leanne. You tell us why.*
Girl 2	*Um it's a bit like David Beckham, sort of thing.*
Interviewer	*Ok.*
Girl 2	*Like trying to get like, she was cool when she first started but as the year's gone on she just got like really sort of desperate. And always advertises, she tries to bring herself back up but she just can't do it.*

Year 6, State School, Mixed Group

Here the children are describing the ineluctable downward spiral of Britney (and Beckham). They seem to see her demise as controlled by some outside force which she has to battle with ("she just got like really sort of desperate") but which ultimately she cannot defeat ("but she just can't do it").

And the downward spiral will occur even if the celebrity is actually good at what they do. In the next discussion the girls consign Britney to the middle column because "she's good (at singing) but she's bad coz she's going out."

Girl 1	*Britney Spears I think in the middle.*
Girl 2	*In the middle yeah.*
Girl 3	*She's on the verge of going.*
Interviewer	*So down in the middle why?*
Girl 1	*Because she's, she's good but she's bad coz she's going out.*
Interviewer	*Ok.*
Girl 1	*But she's good.*
Girl 2	*She's going out but she hasn't gone yet.*

Year 6, Private School, Girls Group

However, the children also understood that the process of fashion cyclical whereby something which is not fashionable to-day may become fashionable tomorrow. The dialogue about Action Man thus continues as follows:

Interviewer	*Out of fashion.*
Girl 3	*Out of fashion for now. It'll probably come back in a few years time though won't it?*

Year 6, State School, Girls Group

Indeed some of the children even understood the commercial value of keeping something until it comes back again.

Interviewer	*Yeah. So do you think there's actually quite a lot of this sort of thing, like things coming in and out of fashion now?*
Boy	*Yeah. Like a couple of years later you can take them to a shop or something and get lots of money for it.*
Interviewer	*Uh-huh.*
Boy	*I keep like, coz with the Yogioh cards, I've kept them all so like I was thinking about selling them on, but they wouldn't sell for that much, so I'm just going to keep them so that when they go back in fashion and stuff...*

Year 6, State School, Boys Group

Thus just as cool may be in the eyes of the beholder, cool may also be a function of the times.

To summarise, we can see children in junior school negotiating the coolness of brands by mobilising a range of concepts which are interlinked and often contradictory. Cool can be entertainment (but it's not quite the same thing); cool can be popular (but not too popular); and cool can be fashionable (but fashion is cyclical).

Yet, within this fickle world, one brand seems to remain constant – the Simpsons.

Interviewer	*Ok, we'll go onto the next one then. What about The Simpsons?*
Boy	*Yeah, they're like the best TV programme ever.* *What would we do without them?*
Interviewer	*Yeah.*
Boy	*They were like cool and popular and they'll never really go out of fashion.*

Year 6, State School, Boys Group

2. Gender

The discussions around the brands were highly gendered across all groups with various gender positions being defined through attitudes towards both toys and celebrities. Whilst the children talked of "girl toys" and "boy toys" two further gendered categories were reflected in the talk of both girls and boys: "girly girls" and "tomboys". The following exchanges from Year 3 children illustrates how these categories are defined through marketing commodities.

Interviewer	*OK what about Britney Spears? (...)*
Girl 1	*No, no, no!*
Girl 2	*Yeah, yeah, yeah!*
Boy 1	*To the boys it would be oh no, to the girls it would be oh yeah.*
Girl 1	*One of the girls in our class, she's a tomboy, she might not like her.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Interviewer	*First of all, what about Pokemon cards?*
Boy 1	*I think they're cool.*
Girl 1	*I don't cos I'm a girl.*
Inerviewer	*OK cos you're a girl, so.......*
Girl 1	*Yeah because some girls don't like them cos they think they're too boy, but tomboys like them.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Interviewer	*And you girls, you don't like them? (Action Man)*
Girl 1	*No cos they're for boys.*
Interviewer	*They're for boys.*
Girl 1	*Unless girls can really, are really really tough tomboys just like a boy and have hair exactly like a boy, um, they probably will like them. But apart from that no girl likes them.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Interviewer	*OK and do you think other people in your class like the Simpsons?*
Girl 1	*Yes*
Girl 2	*Definitely the boys, some of the girls, I don't think they would like it, cause they're kind of more girly than we are (Girl3: Yeah, all the other three girls) um, the boys like*
Interviewer	*Oh, OK, OK, go on, so all the other three girls*
Girl 2	*All the other three girls are really girly and we're a bit more tomboy-ey*
Interviewer	*Ah, OK, so is it something that more tomboy-ey people like?*
Girl 1	*Yeah*

Year 3, State School, Girl Group

In the above extracts, 7 to 8 year old boys and especially girls make a distinction between 'girls', 'boys' and 'tomboys', such that it is possible to identify which category an individual belongs to in relation to their preferences for specific commodities, from Pokemon cards to Britney Spears. 'Tomboys' are constituted as being girls who are "just like boys" in appearance and demeanour, such that 'girl-ness' is treated as an inherent quality that can be masculinised into the category of the 'tomboy', or (further) feminised into the 'girly girl'. It can be noted that throughout the discussions, masculinity remained the unmarked norm against which these positions were located. There is no position of "girly boy". This echoes findings by Renold (2005) in other British primary schools.

Our study also supports Renolds findings that the notion of a "girl as a boy" ceases to be acceptable to children as they move towards puberty. The conversations of the Year 6 children were still highly gendered, but the discrete positions of "tomboy" and "girly girl" were not longer used in discussions. The discussions over games consoles illustrates the change.

Girl	*I think that the rate I go through Playstations and X-Box's and everything, it's like the rate I go through days. I absolutely love them all, and I just play on them all the time and many people would think "oh my gosh, a girl likes Playstations and stuff", and I'm more into Playstations than dance mats, like totally, but I think I like the Playstation the best.*

Year 6, Private School, Mixed Group

Here the girl indicates that Playstations are considered a male toy but rather than associating herself with a "tomboy" identity, she is asserting individuality.

We can thus see that branded commodities are highly gendered for junior school children and that they are used to define a variety of gendered positions which change over the course of the period from 7-11.

The theme of gender is explored further in the next section on Barbie.

3. Barbie: hatred, destruction and violence

The most striking thing about the discourse which surrounded the forty year old iconic Barbie was the rejection, hatred and violence which the doll provoked. The picture of Barbie evoked practically no positive sentiments – even amongst 7 year old girls.

Interviewer   *OK, so we'll go onto the next one, Barbie*

Girl 1   *Urgh, no, please turn the page, no, please!!!*

Girl 2   *That is so not cool!!! Ugggh!!*

Girl 3   *Turn the next page, so not cool at all !!*

Girl 1   *no!*

Year 3, Private School, Girls Group

Interviewer   *Ok, we'll go onto the next one. What about Barbie?*

Girl 1   *Urggh!*

Girl 2   *Not cool.*

Girl 3   *Not cool!*

Year 3, State School, Girls Group

Interviewer   *Ok, we'll go onto the next one. Barbie!*

Boy 1   *Yuck!*

(Two boys get up and hide behind their chairs making gagging noises)

Boy 2   *I'm going to puke!*

Interviewer   *Ok, come back, sit down. Ok, come back, sit, sit, sit, sit. Great ok, so you don't like it.*

Boy 2   *It makes me feel sick.*

(One boy continues to hide his eyes and the other keeps his back to the interviewer whilst talking)

Year 3, State School, Boys Group

> *Girl*   *They're sickly, they're horrible! I hate them, I've always, always, always hated Barbies.*
>
> **Year 6, Private School, Mixed Group**

And even the few children who admitted liking Barbie were unenthusiastic about them, as witnessed in this mixed year 3 group.

Interviewer   *What about Barbie?*

Boy   *No*

Interviewer   *Do you like Barbies?*

Girl 1   *They're ok.*

Interviewer   *Ok. Tell me about them Mary.*

Girl 1   *Well we've got quite a few coz my sister likes them.*

Interviewer   *Uh-huh.*

Girl 1   *I just play with them.*

Interviewer   *Ok.*

Girl 1   *Coz there's nothing else to do.*

Interviewer   *Ok, and do other people in your class like them do you think?*

Boy   *I don't know.*

Girl 2   *You do, coz I like them.*

Interviewer   *You like them Jennifer.*

Girl 2   *Because I got them when I was about 2, 3 or 4, and then I kind of took them around with me whenever I went to stay, and now when I, like I don't know what to do, and then I just say "alright, I might as well just play with my Barbie dolls". I might as well just do that. Anything to keep me happy.*

Interviewer   *Oh, ok. Ok, so you play with them with other girls as well?*

Girl 2   *Yeah. Um, not really, not really. Because most of the time we just play something else, like on the computer and stuff.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Even although both of the girls in this group actually did play with Barbies, there appeared to be a complicit agreement that it was not really cool to admit to enjoying playing with them. Playing with Barbie was presented as a last resort option ("when I don't know what to do") rather than a toy of choice. Or it was claimed that playing with Barbie was only done to keep someone else happy ("cause my sister likes them").

But the meaning of Barbie went beyond an expressed antipathy. Actual physical violence towards the doll was repeatedly reported (gleefully) across age, school and gender. The following quotations give a flavour of the accounts.

Girl 1	*I still have loads of them so I can torture them.*
Girl 2	*Me too.*
Girl 3	*I dye their hair...*
Girl 1	*So I think I'll torture them and pull their heads off. Coz they're not particularly cool unless ...*
Interviewer	*They're not particularly cool unless you what?*
Girl 1	*Torture them.*

Year 6, Private School, Girls Group

This group of girls see Barbie torture as a legitimate play activity and see the torture as a cool activity in contrast to other forms of play with the doll.

The following exchange between a boy and a girl in a Year 3 group indicates that both boys and girls participate in mutilating the doll.

Girl	*My sister used to keep pulling off the Barbie's head and not be able to get the head back on.*
Boy	*It all happened to my sister, well, when my sister started collecting Barbies, um, I was, I hid them so um, I took them away from them and just cut off their heads.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

The types of mutilation are varied and creative and range from removing the hair to decapitation, burning, breaking and microwaving. These selected quotes illustrate:

Girl 1	*Our friend does that with Barbies.*
Girl 2	*Yeah, she microwaves them.*
Interviewer	*She microwaves them? Oh gosh.*
Girl 1	*Did she parachute one out of the house?*
Girl 2	*Yeah, she parachuted one of the house and it landed in the next-door neighbours' garden.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

Interviewer	*What about Barbie?*
All Children	*(loud and in unison) Boo!*
Boy 1	*The one thing I like about Barbie is that they're quite good at destroying. My sister had one a very, very long time ago and I did like putting soap over them and burning them and breaking them*
Boy 2	*(with actions) You grab their hair and pull their heads off*
Girl	*My sister cut all of her hair off cause I used to have them and she cut all of its hair off and it was bald*

Year 3, State School, Mixed Group

The reasons for this hatred and violence were explored with the groups. A variety explanations emerged elucidating the rich symbolic potential of Barbie. She is hated because she is babyish, she is hated because she is unfashionable, she is hated because she is plastic, she is hated because she has multiple selves and she is hated because she is a feminine icon. These evaluations of Barbie and discussed are illustrated in the following sections.

Babyish Barbie

The most readily expressed reason for rejecting Barbie was that she was babyish. The girls in particular saw her as representing their younger childhood out of which they felt they had now grown. To disavow Barbie was to perform a rite of passage and to reject the past.

Girl	*I think I'm a bit too old for Barbie now. I have got a whole box of them but I never play with them, they're under my bed.*
Interviewer	*Ok, so, so how old are you now Kim?*
Girl	*7.*
Interviewer	*Ok. Ok. But you used to like them when you were younger?*
Girl	*I used to like it when I was younger.*
Interviewer	*Yeah? And you did too...*
Girl	*A lot younger.*
Interviewer	*Yeah.*
Girl	*2.*
Girl	*I gave it 'til I was 3 and then I was like getting too old and I kept having to squish their heads off...*

Year 3, State School, Girls Group

For this particular girl, the rite of passage was expressed as a sort of compulsion towards a violent rejection ("I kept having to squish their heads off").

This use of toys to articulate the ineluctability of progression through childhood was also displayed through attitudes to Action Man – a toy which was also rejected as babyish by most groups.

Boy 1	*I used to think they were cool but, coz my nan used to buy them for me until I got bored of them. Coz you know like when you get older and you like throw away things that you used to love playing with? And my dad he used to have them then he gave them to me and I gave them to my sister.*
Boy 2	*Um, I think Action Man is like a great toy for like 6 year olds and stuff. Um, if I always stayed 6 years old I would never get bored of it. It was a great toy. Now that when you're like stuck, when you get to 8, like 7 and 8 and like that it just kind of wears out and you just kind of like do different things with them. Like I dropped my Action Man out the window. And pull the arms and the legs off and that.*

Year 6, State School, Boys Group

Although this same rite of passage is articulated through attitudes to Action Man ("it just kind of wears out") it is interesting that Action Man inspires feelings of affection ("things you used to love playing with") and nostalgia ("it was a great toy") which were totally absent from the discussions of Barbie. Indeed, the negative symbolism with which Barbie is imbued is altogether more complex than that surrounding Action Man. Thus, although Action Man was seen by many children as Barbie's male counterpart ("It's Barbie's lover" Boy, Year 3, Mixed Group, State School; "Put it near Barbie (on the sorting task) they play together" Year 3, Girls, Private School; "He's made out of Barbie dolls, he's a little baby." Boy, Year 3, Mixed, State School) - rejecting Barbie was an act much deeper than a simple repudiation of a previous life stage.

Unfashionable Barbie

Indeed, discarding Barbie was also expressed as a rebuff of the unfashionable. This was particularly salient amongst the Year 6 children.

Girl 1	*See Barbies were the fashion and I got them, and they went out of fashion and they're coming back into fashion.*
Girl 1	*Um people in year 6 and people like that, I thought they don't actually like Barbies anymore these days coz Barbie went out of fashion like 2, 3 years ago.*
Girl 2	*Yeah but it's come back in fashion.*
Girl 3	*It's coming back in fashion now.*
Interviewer	*So if they are coming back in fashion, do you think people your age would still play with them?*
Girl 1	*No.*
Girl 2	*No. The younger ones really now.*

Year 6, State School, Girls Group

Here we can see two concepts competing for prominence in the girls' interpretation of what Barbie means. On the one hand she is seen as symbolic of what is or isn't in fashion ("Barbie went out of fashion like 2,3 years ago") and on the other she is seen as linked with a specific age group of children ("The younger ones really.") In the end the group did not resolve whether Barbie's coolness was a function of her fashion status or her age appropriateness. The symbolism remained dual.

Plastic Barbie

Another reason ventured for rejecting Barbie was that she is made of plastic. For some it was an environmental issue "Plastic is wasting the world's resources to make these little Barbie dolls." Year 6, Girls, Private School. For others the material itself was not perceived as cool. Thus a Year 6 State School mixed group had the following exchange as they decided where to pin Barbie on the Cool-Not Cool cork board.

Girl 1	*(holding up the little picture) Barbie!*
Girl 1	*(Pinning the picture practically on top of the words "not cool") – Not cool. Right under not cool.*
Girl 2	*Not cool.*
Girl 1	*We're putting Barbie there because she's Barbie.*
Boy 1	*Not cool. She's plastic, not cool.*
Girl 2	*Coz she's plastic.*
Boy 2	*So is Action Man*
Girl 1	*Yeah but action man's cool!*

Year 6, State School, Mixed Group

Here again we see the children trying to disentangle the meanings of Barbie. On one level Barbie is not cool because she has simply come to symbolise all that is not cool ("because she's Barbie") and her picture is placed as close to the words "not cool" as possible. Yet they feel the need to supply a better explanation and so one of the boys claims that it is her plasticity which makes her uncool ("coz she's plastic"). However, the other boy sees a flaw in this because Action Man is also made of plastic and he has already been placed on the cool side of the board. The negotiation process comes to an end as the other girl asserts confidently that ("yeah but he's action man") implying that he has some other qualities (lacking in Barbie) which allow him to transcend his plasticity in a way not available to Barbie.

Multiple Barbie

One might expect a doll to fulfil the function of friend or playmate. One might expect a little girl to consider her Barbie as a person, a human to whom she might talk. One might expect her to love her Barbie and expect imaginary love in return. Instead girls feel violence and hatred towards their Barbie. Analysis of the discourses surrounding Barbies suggests that one interpretation of this rather perplexing finding may be that whilst Barbie masquerades as a person – she actually exists in multiple selves. The children never talked of one, single, special Barbie. She was always referred to in the plural. Moreover, accounts of Barbie ownership always implied an excess – too many Barbies. Most children not only had more than one Barbie, they had a box of Barbies: and not just a box, a very large box.

> **Girl**   *"Coz my sister has this gigantic Barbie box"*
> **Year 3, Private School, Girls Group**
>
> **Girl**   *"I have got a whole box of them but I never play with them, they're under my bed."*
> **Year 3, State School, Girls Group**
>
> **Girl**   *"I remember when I bought the latest one and it had a bit flower just at the side of the Barbie and I came home and I was going "Mummy, Mummy, look what I've got!" and my dad, my mum were 'Not another one!' I've had so many. I've still got a really big box."*
> **Year 6, State School, Girls Group**
>
> **Girl**   *"And me and my sister had like an entire box of them, it was really funny. And then about two years later the whole box got throw away because we decided we hated them."*
> **Year 6, Private School, Girls Group**
>
> **Girl**   *I used to have a huge box of Barbies."*
> **Year 6, State School, Mixed Group**

On one level, Barbie has come to symbolise excess – the children have too many Barbies; they are not special, they are disposable, and are thus thrown away and rejected. On a deeper level, Barbie appears to have become almost inanimate, she has lost any individual warmth she might have possessed if she were perceived as a singular person. A box is a place to put "things", not a place to put cherished possessions and certainly not a place to put a friend. This view - ubiquitously held by the children we interviewed - that Barbie has become simply a manufactured commodity is expressed rather well by a Year 6 boy at the Private School, "They've made like, sort of fairy ones, like in that picture. I mean, OK, Barbie if anything it should be a human."

Barbie has become an "it". She "should be a human" but clearly for the children she is not human. This may go some way towards explaining the violence and torture. Whilst for an adult the delight the children felt in breaking, mutilating and torturing their dolls is deeply disturbing, from the child's point of view they were simply being imaginative in disposing of an excessive commodity in the same way as one might crush cans for recycling or pass papers through the shredder.

Deeply Gendered Barbie

Beyond these interpretations, the symbolic use of Barbie was also, as one might expect, deeply gendered. "I think it's all about little girls, princesses." (Year 6, Boys Private School); "I'll tell you why it's sick. It's for girls" (Year 3, Boys, Private School). However, it was not simply a case of boys rejecting girls' toys. The reality is more complex than this, for in all 16 group discussions of Barbie, the construct of "girly" was rarely separated from the construct of "babyish" as illustrated by the following selection of typical exchanges.

Interviewer	*What kind of people like Barbie?*
Girl 1	*Babies.*
Girl 2	*Sissies.*
Girl 3	*Girls, um, not babies, but really girly girls.*
Girl 2	*Like Polly, she'd love that – she's got six.*
Girl 3	*Gemma loves them.*

Year 3, Private School, Girls Group

Here these 7 and 8 year old girls are trying to disentangle the concepts of babyishness ("babies") and effeminacy ("sissies"). One girl decides on the notion of the "girly girl" to define Barbie symbolism and then as a group they name girls (Polly and Gemma) who fit the category. In fact, as we have seen above, Polly and Gemma (who happened to be interviewed in one of the mixed groups) did confirm their liking for the doll.

In the next discussion (with the same age girls in the State School) we see the counterpart of the "girly girl", the "tomboy" being used to fix meaning to Barbie.

Interviewer	*Ok. Ok, um, what do you think of Barbies Rose?*
Girl 1	*Um I don't really like it.*
Interviewer	*No? Why do you think that is?*
Girl 2	*Coz she's a tomboy.*
Girl 1	*A bit babyish.*

Year 3, State School, Girls Group

Here again we see how the notions of femininity and immaturity are interlinked in the children's minds. Katy sees her rejection of Barbie as a sign that she is grown-up ("a bit babyish") whilst her friend sees it as a sign of her male tendencies ("she's a tomboy").

This inextricable association of the infantile and the feminine which we have seen across other brands is an issue which will be explored in much more depth in the next stage of our research.

Barbie evokes a range of complex, interlinked emotions on the part of children which cannot easily be explained in any uni-dimensional way.   But perhaps her meaning has been summed up to some extent by a Year 6 boy from the State School.

"It's kind of like, it's a really bad classic. Let's say 2 out of 10 girls will buy it and like treasure it and like keep it in like glass boxes and stuff. Whereas others will buy it and just break it and stuff."

So that is Barbie for 7-11 year olds in the UK: A REALLY BAD CLASSIC.

4. Rejection of Marketing and Advertising

We noted in our findings of Stage 1 that children's everyday discourses are deeply embedded in the commercial world where products, brands, TV shows, advertising, celebrities and electronics seem to co-habit seamlessly. We noted that children enjoyed the game of naming brands and appreciated the creative executions, tunes and jingles of a lot of adverts (many for adult products). However, the in-depth discussions of Stage 2 revealed a more ambivalent relationship to marketing and advertising practices.

The children were quite happy to admit that they routinely bought products simply because they were advertised on TV or marketed through their own TV show. The following quotations about Beyblades from a year 6 boy in the single sex group at the State School and about Bratz from a year 3 boy in a mixed group at the Private School are typical:

Interviewer	*Ok. Do you remember when people first started playing with them (Beyblades)? Do you remember how that happened? Who started playing with them first?*
Boy 1	*Um, it was coz of a TV programme wasn't it? And everyone started buying them from the shops and playing with them...*
Boy 2	*Um, there was, they did loads of advertisements of them.*

Year 6, State School, Boys Group

Interviewer	*How did your sister start playing with them (Bratz)?*
Boy	*Saw an advert on TV.*
Interviewer	*And then your parents bought it for her?*
Boy	*Yes.*

Year 3, Private School, Mixed Group

However, although the children acknowledged the power of advertising and marketing to make them buy they also had a negative reaction to advertising and marketing targeted directly at them. Thus the boy who told us that the result of the Beyblades TV programme was that "everyone started buying them from the shops" went on to say "I don't think the TV programmes were that good anyway." And a year 3 State School girl when asked where she had heard about Bratz dolls replied, "Stupid TV".

Moreover, the negativity about the TV show or adverts appeared to rub off on the perception of the toy. The year 6 boy continued his story about the advent of Beyblades in the playground by saying, "We thought they were really good and then once we bought one we thought it was a bit rubbish."

This disillusionment with the gulf between advertising and reality is shown in greater depth during a discussion about Action Man amongst a Year 6 mixed group in the private school.

> *Girl*   *Like on TV. I remember in Year 5 when "Digit" was on, every 2 ads there was Action Man (sings the tune for the advert).*
>
> *Boy*   *I think I was interested in them coz when they advertised them they showed them really like, in places that suited them, but when you actually got them, you didn't actually get the setting ... it was just your bedroom."*
>
> **Year 6, Private School, Mixed group**

In his view, this was deceptive advertising: what was shown on TV was not an accurate portrayal of the reality of playing with the toy at home.

Some children elaborated this disappointment by criticising the quality of the product itself. Thus a year 3 girl at the State School said at the end of a lengthy discussion about Action Man:

> **Girl**   *I hate it because it's sort of rubbish because the motorbikes keep breaking and everything. It's easy to break.*
>
> **Year 3, State School, Girls Group**

In turn, this disillusionment with the product quality was often expressed in terms of value for money. For example, a girl in one of the Year 6 mixed groups at the State School exclaimed about Barbie:

> **Girl**   *The price is £14.99 for a little piece of plastic with hair and a face.*
>
> **Year 6, State School, Mixed Group**

And a boy in the Year 6 single sex group at the State School noted with some indignation about Beyblades:

> **Boy**   *They were very expensive. Well, not very expensive but it's an awful lot for just some bits of plastic and metal.*
>
> **Year 6, State School, Boys Group**

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Some more sophisticated commentary about marketing practice also emerged from the Year 6 children. One prevalent issue was marketing overkill. Children reacted very negatively to companies which they felt "tried too hard". A boy in the single sex State School group said of Action Man,

> **Boy** It's a toy that doesn't need a television show as well, they haven't go to have a TV show and stupid movies.
>
> **Year 6, State School, Boys Group**

For some children this excess marketing (a television show and stupid movies as well) was seen as a waste of the company's resources. As a Year 6 girl in one of the Private School mixed groups noted about Barbie marketing,

> **Girl** She's like Action Man really, although she's a Barbie, and they just make TV programmes and adverts and movies and it's just so, a waste of their money I think.
>
> **Year 6, Private School, Mixed Group**

Another child in a mixed State School groups viewed the surfeit of advertising and marketing as a sort of cover-up for a poor product and as a result rejected (almost on principle) things that are on TV.

> **Girl** I don't think anything much of things when they are on TV, it's showing they're trying to get people's attention and I think the sort of things that are good are the sort of things that don't normally get on TV. If it gets in TV, I normally wouldn't buy it."
>
> **Year 6, Private School, Mixed Group**

Other children were angry about being ripped off. They understand, as we have seen above, that children's products go in and out of fashion quickly and they think marketers exploit this by not only over-marketing but also over-charging. A boy in one of the State School mixed groups noted about Beyblades,

> **Boy** ....and they used to sell them at far too expensive cause they knew that everyone wanted to buy them so they were like £6 for one thing...so they made them extremely expensive cause they knew it'd go out of fashion soon so if they could quickly sell them now for lots of money then they would get loads.
>
> **Year 6, State School, Mixed Group**

Thus we see children at once victims of the marketing machine, responding swiftly to exhortations from the TV screen to buy the latest toy; and at the same time sophisticated critics of marketers who are palming them off with shoddy goods at over inflated prices. The relationship is a highly ambiguous one.

Further Research

The next stage of this research is to replicate this study with a more diverse sample of children. In 2006-7 we aim to talk to children from a broader range of geographical areas (rural, suburban and inner city areas); to children from a broader range of socio-economic categories (the very rich and the very deprived); and from a broader range of ethnic backgrounds.

The items of "things that kids are into" will have changed over the past year since stage 1 was conducted. The next stage of research will therefore include different objects. One focus of analysis will be to ascertain if the same social functions are fulfilled by these different objects.

Key themes which will be specifically investigated in focused interviews are:
- The complexity of cool for this age group (negotiated, fun, fashionable and popular)
- The gendering of branded products
- The usage of heroes like Beckham to manage social concepts
- Violence towards Barbie
- Relationships with advertising and marketing

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The Role of Brands in the Everyday Lives of Junior School Children

January 2006

This report presents the results of the first two stages of an ongoing study conducted by researchers at the University of Bath into the role of brands in the everyday lives of junior school children (ages 7-11) in the UK. Stage 1 was completed in October 2004 and Stage 2 in July 2005. The focus of the research is understanding the meaning of brands *from the child's viewpoint.*

Agnes Nairn
School of Management

Christine Griffin
Department of Psychology

Patricia Gaya Wicks
School of Management

Contact: Dr Agnes Nairn
School of Management
University of Bath
Claverton Down
Bath, BA2 7AY
+44 1225 386202
a.c.nairn@bath.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF BATH