

## **“Busted are Cool but Barbie’s a Minger”**

### **The Role of Advertising and Brands in the Everyday Lives of Junior School Children**

We have witnessed a dramatic increase in and intensification of children’s exposure to commercially sponsored media in recent years both in Europe and the USA. Children interact with brand messages on an almost continual basis and their spending power is increasing all the time. Yet, it is our contention that the developmental psychology paradigm which is used almost exclusively in academic and practitioner marketing research is unable to capture the sophistication and complexity of the relationships between brands and children in contemporary society. We review the key developmentalist literature in the field, present the methodology and findings of the first part of an empirical study specifically designed to be open to alternative interpretations and go on to discuss some alternative theoretical underpinnings which could enrich the marketing community’s understanding of how to-day’s children interact with brands.

**Keywords:** brands, Piaget, sociology of consumption, sociology of childhood, brand literacy, consumption symbolism, developmentalism, children 7-11

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## **BACKGROUND**

Four trends have emerged over the last decade. First, children's spending power and influence have increased. Globally they spend an annual US\$300 billion from pocket money and holiday jobs and influence a further US\$1.88 trillion of family expenditure (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003). Second, the scope of advertising and branding activities has exploded with the advent of new technologies and the increasing challenge for companies to cut through the clutter of ubiquitous commercial messages by finding inventive ways to reach children. Advertising to children now includes internet banners, pop-ups and advergames; sms campaigns; product placements on TV shows, films and video games; increasingly sophisticated ambient advertising and a host of guerrilla advertising tactics (e.g. Shor, 2004). Third, children are targeted more directly both through internet sign-ups and direct marketing campaigns such as the personal approach made to the Head Girls of UK girls' schools by the record company representing young jazz star Jamie Cullum (Sherwin, 2005). Fourth, it seems that children recognise and relate to brands at an ever younger age (Valkenberg and Buijzen, 2005).

However, it is our contention that the theoretical framework used in the academic marketing literature (and, by extension, in the practice of marketing) to underpin understanding of how children use advertised brands may no longer provide a satisfactory means of appreciating the sophistication and complexity of children's contemporary relationships to marketing, branding and consumption. Our chapter proceeds as follows: first we describe the paradigm which currently dominates research in marketing to children; second we briefly review the key literature in the field; third we present the methodology and findings of the first stage of an empirical study specifically designed to be open to alternative interpretations; and finally, we discuss some alternative theoretical underpinnings which could enrich the marketing community's understanding of how to-day's children interact with brands.

## **DOMINANCE OF PIAGET'S DEVELOPMENTALIST PARADIGM**

The literature on marketing to children is underpinned almost exclusively by psychological theories. More specifically, the landmark studies into children's uses of consumption objects (notably Belk, Bahn and Meyer, 1982; Belk, Meyer and Driscoll, 1984; Achereiner and John 2003) have all drawn heavily on Jean Piaget's (1960) age-stage model of childhood cognitive and social development, sometimes termed "developmentalism". This approach has been bolstered by Deborah Roedder John's comprehensive and influential review of 25 years of children's consumer socialisation literature (John, 1999) which is also underpinned by a cognitive and social development paradigm.

According to Piagetian theory, the child's mental and interactive capacities evolve in a linear fashion through a set of biologically predetermined stages which John (1999) summarises as: "perceptual" stage (age 3-7); "analytical" stage (age 7-11) and "reflective" stage (age 11-16). The pre-eminence of this paradigm has led to preponderance, in the best marketing journals, of studies to ascertain the effect of a child's age on the emergence and use of brand meanings (e.g. Achereiner and John, 2003). These studies tend to compare the social inferences a child makes about people from the products and brands which they own or use (consumption stereotypes) with the inferences made by adults (most notably Belk, Bahn and Meyer (1982); Belk, Meyer and Driscoll (1984). The implication is that consumer socialisation involves children "learning" these adult stereotypes.

The stance which marketing practitioners (and, indeed, government regulators) have taken towards children has also been materially informed by developmentalism. This is particularly so in relation to the somewhat controversial area of establishing an age at which it is "fair" to direct television advertising to children (e.g. Levin, Petros and Petrella, 1982; Macklin, 1987; Oates et al. 2002). For example, the decision by the Swedish government to ban advertising directly aimed at children under 12 was based on a developmentalist study by Bjurstrom (1994). Ascertaining this "magic" age is seen as pivotal to legislation because the underpinning assumption is that if a child has developed sufficient cognitive competence to have an adult appreciation of the marketer's intent then the advertising is deemed "fair". The age-stage view of the child's relationship with the market place is also implicit in the ubiquitous term KGOY ("Kids Getting Older Younger": see Kurnit, 2004; Sutherland and Thomson, 2003) as it implies that there is a "right" age for particular children's behaviour and that children are now behaving out of line with their expected Piagetian development. Thus it is reported with some surprise that whilst girls used to play with dolls until 13, they now spurn them at 8 (Kurnit, 2004).

However, it our contention that reliance on this single psychological frame of reference is stultifying the academic marketing community's understanding of children's relationships with commercial brands, for research using a Piagetian paradigm is not well equipped to detect the conceptual categories which children themselves use to negotiate the intense world of brands and products which now surrounds them. Research in this area is largely absent from the mainstream marketing literature.

## **REVIEW OF LANDMARK LITERATURE**

The influential Russell Belk provided one of the first studies on children's understanding of the brand world, specifically in terms of social symbolism. Belk et al.'s 1982 experimental study compared the abilities different age groups of children (preschool, 7-8, 11-12, 13-14) as well as college students and adults to match up different styles of houses and cars to different types of people (e.g. a grandfather, a

mailman, smart, lucky, someone I would like to visit). They concluded that the ability to recognise the social implications of consumption choices is minimal among preschoolers, significant by second grade (7/8) and almost fully developed by 6<sup>th</sup> grade (11/12) and that taken as a whole, the findings indicated that consumption symbolism recognition develops during grade school. They also noted that more detailed work was needed to understand the role of various socialising forces on the development of consumption symbolism. The assumption underpinning the study is that adults somehow have the “right” interpretation of the brand symbols and that, as they develop cognitively, children learn to see the world “correctly”. It is worthy of note that the objects of study (cars and houses) are purchase categories with which children – at least in 1982 – had limited involvement. This raises questions as to the validity of the study. It is also interesting that the notion of learning to think like an adult is unquestioningly considered to be linked with cognitive development and not simply with greater exposure to the world. It could quite easily be argued that a group of 11 year olds are more likely than a group of 4 year olds to concur that an Animal branded T-shirt is “the right attire” for a surfer because of longer and more varied exposure to messages from commercial sources and peer discussion. Equally, given direct marketing to children which by passes parents it may well be that in contemporary society adults are unable to “correctly” match a youth brand such as “Animal” with a particular young person’s culture or sub culture.

In a second study Belk et al. (1984) began to address both of the criticisms raised above. First they altered the products from houses and cars to those more likely to be familiar to and therefore have more meaningful consumption symbolism potential for children. Through a series of pre-tests they selected both desirable and non-desirable brands for the categories of jeans, bicycles, shoes and video games. Subjects were either 9/10 or 11/12. Again they were testing the strength of consumption based stereotypes and they concluded again that older children hold stronger consumption-based stereotypes than younger children. They also found in this experiment that girls hold stronger consumption-based stereotypes than boys and that higher social classes hold stronger consumption-based stereotypes than lower social classes. They also noted that ownership of the product made stereotyping stronger. It is this that leads the researchers to raise for the first time the issue of the mediating role of experience in children’s use of consumption symbolism. “The fact that hypothesised differences were found not only between age groups but also between sex and social class groups suggests that experience may be more important than cognitive development to the acquisition of consumption-based symbolism ...For the ages investigated in this study, it thus appears that consumption-based stereotypes gain strength and clarity as the child has more opportunity to see the product and its users.” (pg. 396) However, the researchers do not seek another paradigm within which to research and the subject remained largely untouched in the major marketing journals for twenty years.

In 2003 the question of how children use brand symbolism was addressed again by another experimental study (Achereiner and John, 2003). 4 stimuli were used in the experiment: a preferred brand of jeans (Levis), a preferred brand of trainers (Nike), and a non-preferred brand of each (Kmart in both cases). Children in 3 age categories (8,12,16) were shown pictures of one pair of trainers and one pair of jeans (identical except for caption which gave brand name) and completed 3 tasks: evaluate the product; give impressions of person who would own the product; evaluate 5 brand extensions for each preferred brand (e.g. Nike shampoo or Levis shoes).

The researchers concluded that the evaluation behaviour of the 8 year olds was significantly different on all 3 tasks from the older two age groups confirming that this youngest age group do not use conceptual brand meanings as a basis for their product but rather use simple perceptual recognition clues. However, they draw somewhat contradictory conclusions with regards to the influence of cognitive competence and experience. On the one hand they deny the primacy of experience over cognitive ability in children's understanding of brand symbolism:

*“We have argued that the emergence and use of conceptual brand meanings depends heavily on the availability of age-related cognitive abilities and social inferencing skills. Even though the formation of conceptual brand meanings requires a certain level of product experience, it is our view that underdeveloped cognitive and social skills cannot be overcome by simply providing more exposure, familiarity, or experience with the product or brand in question.” P. 215*

Yet, on the other they acknowledge the role of product experience in children's brand extension evaluations.

*“Taken together, these results suggest that product experience plays a more important role in explaining age differences in brand extension evaluations than predicted.” P. 216*

Their recommendations for further research are as follows:

*“Additional empirical research is warranted to better understand what occurs between 8 and 12 years of age and to test our notion that the key period of development is 10 – 12 years of age.” P. 217*

*“More research surrounding the role that experience plays in facilitating the use of conceptual brand meanings would be welcome”. P. 217*

It is our contention that our understanding of how contemporary children relate to brands is unlikely to be substantially furthered either by concentrating on what happens within the mind of the individual 8 year old or 12 year old; or by adding an “experience” variable into an experiment. We believe that we must, instead, attempt to more broadly understand the brand world from the child's point of view and to access

the conceptual categories used by children themselves to navigate the symbolic potential which the commercialised consumer world offers them.

## **BRAND WORLD OF 17-24 YEAR OLDS**

In constructing our research programme we acknowledge the influence of Ritson and Elliot's 1999 study of the role of TV adverts in the everyday lives of teenagers. Although examining a different age group, theirs is one of the few studies in a marketing journal to move outside the developmentalist paradigm. Using a participant-observational methodology in a study which lasted several weeks they aimed to understand how TV adverts are utilised in the world of 17 and 18 year old school students. Their work in turn draws on Stephanie O'Donohoe's (1994) earlier influential paper which used the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) to categorise how young adults (18-24 year olds) mobilised the functions and experiences of mass communications messages. Like O'Donohoe, Ritson and Elliot (1999) discovered that adverts served a number of important social functions. The researchers discovered that the social uses of adverts were so important to teenagers that they would actually record ads from the TV, watch and rewatch them, and learn them off by heart so that they could display mastery of this social currency and carve out their membership of different crowds.

## **EMPIRICAL STUDY**

We deliberately chose to work with junior school children (age 7-11) in response to Achereiner and John's (2003) call for more research on this age group. We recruited 72 children from 2 mixed UK junior schools in a small city in the south-west of England: one private in the national top 5% for academic achievement; one state below the national average for academic achievement. This selection was made in an attempt to cover a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Given the diversified and intensified nature of contemporary branding activities our emphasis was not only on the uses of advertising but on the roles played by brands themselves. Our fundamental research question was thus: what roles do brands play in the everyday lives of junior school children?

We present here key findings of the first part of a two stage study designed to capture the child's experience of advertising and brands from the child's point of view. The full results of the two studies can be found in Nairn, Griffin and Gaya Wicks (2006).

## **Methodology**

In terms of methodology, our study has three points of difference from previous studies with younger children. First of all, we wanted to ensure that the consumption objects discussed really were those which were meaningful to children. Thus at the beginning of the sessions, the children themselves generated the

consumption objects for discussion. By contrast, in the studies by Belk (1982, 1984) and by Achereiner and John (2003) the products for inclusion in the study originated from adult suggestions (even though in the latter case they were rigorously tested for relevance with a large group of children). Second, we wanted to find out how children constructed meaning from consumption objects rather than testing whether they could interpret the adult world or whether there were age differences in ability to assign fixed meaning to a brand. We did not wish to test consistency of interpretation but rather to explore the process by which interpretation takes place. Third, as the process of assigning meanings to objects is a deeply social process we wished to facilitate collective response rather than individual interpretation. This contrasts with the paper and pencil experiments used in the studies reviewed above.

It was not possible to use Ritson and Elliot's (1999) observational methodology as unlike sixth formers who have a defined social space where conversational interactions occurs (the "common room") junior school children are either in a structured classroom environment or running around in the playground. The only feasible way to elicit their views was to withdraw groups from classroom time and sit with them in a quiet area of the school. We thus used small group discussion settings for our data collection. Half of the children were age 7/8 (year 3) and half 10/11 (year 6). In each school a third of the groups were girls only; a third boys only and a third mixed gender. Thus, in total, twelve discussions with 6 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 taped (See table 1 for group composition).

The discussions proceeded through a series of set stages. First, children were collectively asked to brainstorm a list of "the things kids in your class are into at the moment". These were inscribed on a flip chart. Second the children were asked to generate as many brand names as they could for the objects on the flip chart. Third, they were asked which words they would use to classify the various brands into either a negative or positive category. This exercise was carried out in order to understand the terminology used by children for use in the second stage of the study. Fourth they were asked to classify the objects and brands which they had generated into two columns, a negative and positive, using their preferred terms of reference. Fifth, still as a group, they were asked to brainstorm and classify TV programmes, celebrities, pop stars, styles, adverts, hairstyles, jewellery and magazines. The total process took around 30 minutes which was as long as 7/8 year olds could concentrate and was an acceptable time for teachers to release children from classroom activities.

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 taped discussions. Both researchers independently analysed the scripts and flip charts and then came together to triangulate common

classifications. We primarily used qualitative thematic analysis guided by an appreciation of quantitative aspects of the data (such as frequency of mentions). 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 social currency for these junior school children. These were to be used in stage 2 of the research, but in stage 1 we were also looking for preliminary insights into how children use brands. It is these preliminary insights which we report here.

## **Findings**

For the British junior school children in our study, 6 types of items were most often mentioned and generated the most excitement and debate across the groups: Games Consoles (X –Box, Game Cube and Play Station), Playground Crazes (Top Trumps, Pokemon Cards, Yugioh Cards and Beyblades), Dolls and Action Figures (Barbie, Action Man and Bratz), TV programmes (Simpsons, Ant and Dec, Dic and Dom in da Bungalow, Eastenders and Coronation Street), Sports Stars (David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Johnny Wilkinson) and Pop Groups (Busted, McFly, Peter Andre, Britney Spears and Michael Jackson).

Whilst TV programmes, sports stars and pop groups are not brands in the sense used in marketing literature, we have classified them together with objects such as Play Stations since it became clear from our analysis of the discussions that children conceptualise them symbolically in the same way. Thus children discussed in detail the marketing activities of Busted (“cool” for most children) with those of McFly. This constitutes our first major finding. 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. Reflecting the findings of O’Donohoe (1994) and Ritson and Elliot (1999) amongst 17-24 year olds, for these children the “influences” are separate commodities in their own right. The adverts which the children enjoyed were for beer and financial services and were appreciated for their entertainment value rather than any effect they might have on product choice or usage. They delighted in reeling off lists of car brands most of which they will never own. At the same time 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 advertise food on television; and TV characters (whether real or cartoon) release music CDs and appear in Playstation games. Thus what begins to emerge is to-day’s junior school children inhabiting a seamless world of media and commercial influences in which games, people, products, music and toys fulfil parallel, interlinked and complementary functions. The way in which

they use brands is deeply embedded in the commercial media culture which they have experienced all their lives.

A further 4 themes identified from this stage of the research are presented below.

### *Lack of Brand Awareness*

In line with the research reviewed above, 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 do 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 brands in the way intended by marketers nor are these functions necessarily “acquired” as children get older.

### *The Brand 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 Vodafone, 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. 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.

#### *Cool and Minging – Negotiated Concepts*

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 of our research.

### *Gendered Nature of Brands*

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 during discussions of Barbie (a “minger” for most children) 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.

### **Conclusion**

Our research deliberately sought to move away from a developmentalist paradigm using psychological experiments which test how children progress towards a fixed understanding of the symbolism in advertising and branding. Instead we tried to illuminate the processes used by children themselves in their interaction with brands. This chapter reports on the results of the first stage of the research. We have shown a junior school world of brands where products themselves merge seamlessly with the adverts and celebrities which promote them and the electronic media through which they are experienced. We have shown a world where symbolic functions of brands are mobilised in a manner which is often playful but is also highly negotiated and deeply gendered. These findings imply a future research agenda which examines in fine detail the interaction between children and the rich and multi-faceted brand world which they now inhabit. This would certainly involve the marketing research community embracing new paradigms, for in contrast to the assumptions of the developmentalist paradigm, the key issue now would appear to be not the age of the child or his/her ability to interpret the adult world but developing an understanding of the way in which children interpret their own brand world.

## **INTRODUCING NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO MARKETING LITERATURE**

What unifies all of the findings presented above is the way in which brands are inextricably linked with the social and cultural milieu of the child whether in the use of a product advert as a source of entertainment or in the complex peer relationships involved in deciding whether or not a brand should be classified as “a minger” or “cool”. It seems clear that these phenomena can be adequately interpreted only through a theoretical framework which goes beyond the cognitive capacities of the individual child to embrace the myriad social and cultural relationships within which brands are experienced by to-day’s children.

Within the marketing literature itself the recently presented Consumer Culture Theory - “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, pg. 868) - offers possibilities, for it seeks to capture interactions rather than reactions. However, as yet, this approach has not been applied to children’s consumption behaviour.

Drawing from outside the field of marketing a richer range of possibilities is encountered. During the 1980s a movement (comprising thinkers from sociology, culture theory, social psychology, geography and anthropology) which has come to be called the “New Social Studies of Childhood” emerged. Arguably the most influential writer, researcher and commentator of the movement is sociologist Alan Prout (1990/1991, 2005). In his latest book *The Future of Childhood* Prout (2005) summarizes the key differences of this his conceptualisation of the child. In the New Social Studies of Childhood paradigm childhood (both in terms of development and in terms of a social institution) is seen as dependent on the environmental context rather than on a naturally evolving biological process. Studies have thus emerged which explore differences in childhood across cultures and across socio-economic groups rather than just across age groups (Joshi et al. 1999; Goldstein, 1998). The focus has also moved from the one-way effect of adult society on children to a broader conceptualisation of the socialisation construct (Archard, 1993). Research and thought within this framework sees children less as *becomings* (i.e. becoming adults) and more as *beings* (i.e. capable of social participation and agency in their own right). Attention has also turned to children in a collective context rather than as individuals (Kehily and Swann, 2003) and children are seen less as the passive objects of socialisation and more as active co-creators of their own place in society.

This approach which has been forged, honed and largely accepted by thinkers from a range of disciplines outside marketing or advertising offers a substantially augmented picture of the child. Rather than the

solitary child gradually acquiring the skills to decode the messages relayed by the adults in charge of society, we see children in collective groups at the same time shaped by their social circumstances and also co-opting, creating and contextualising their own environment.

Martens et al. (2004) contest that research under the banner of the “Sociology of Consumption” may prove useful in understanding children’s consumption. In particular they advocate building on three key theoretical approaches within the Sociology of Consumption: “mode of consumption”, “lifestyle and identity” and “engagement in material culture” to provide 4 new research themes for understanding children’s consumption: “learning to consume”, “lifestyle and identity formation”, “children’s engagement with material culture” and “parent-child relationships”. We can see how these themes could be used to frame a number of our findings and future related research streams. The notion of learning to consume could be used to explore the interrelationship of peer, parental, media and commercial influence on how brands come to be seen as “cool” or “minging”. A lifestyle and identity formation angle could illuminate how children’s brand discourses mark out identity in terms of gender roles and peer popularity. Already we have shown one aspect of how children engage with material culture in our presentation of a seamless world of product, media, advertising, electronics, celebrities and music. And whilst we did not look at the parent-child relationship it would be interesting to compare parent views of children’s brands with those of the children themselves.

A different possible theoretical underpinning for understanding how children use brands is the comprehensive framework proposed by David Buckingham (2005) for understanding Media Literacy of Children and Young in his literature review for Ofcom. Whilst this document has provided a framework for understanding “Media Literacy” a similar framework could be built for the notion of “Brand Literacy”. This might serve to elucidate what children understand by brands, how they are influenced by brands, how brands help them to be creative, how brands oil social interactions and how brands create social divisions.

## **CONCLUSION**

We hope that this chapter has shown three things. First that whilst a developmentalist paradigm has served the academic and practitioner marketing community well in facilitating understanding of children’s cognitive limitations and capacities, recent developments in marketing to children demand a more inclusive framework to understand the sophistication and complexity of children’s relationships with brands. Second, we hope to have shown the possibilities of an approach to brand research with children which does not rely on a quantitative psychological experiment. And finally we hope we have provided some food for thought in terms of specific alternative frameworks (Consumer Culture Theory,

New Sociology of Childhood, Sociology of Consumption, Brand Literacy) which could be used by those seeking to understand why it is that “Busted are Cool but Barbie is a Minger”.

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Table 1: Group Design

Private School		State School	
Year 3 girls	Year 6 girls	Year 3 girls	Year 6 girls
Year 3 boys	Year 6 boys	Year 3 boys	Year 6 boys
Year 3 mixed	Year 6 mixed	Year 3 mixed	Year 6 mixed
18 children	18 children	18 children	18 children
			72 children