Children’s Use of Brand Symbolism: 
A Consumer Culture Theory Approach

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Children and Brand Symbols: A Consumer Culture Approach

Structured Abstract

Purpose
To offer a critique of the Piagetian developmental cognitive psychology model which dominates research into children and brand symbolism. To propose Consumer Culture Theory as an alternative approach. To present the design and interpretation of an empirical study into the roles brands play in the everyday lives of junior school children that demonstrates the richness of this alternative framework.

Methodology/Approach
Key literature on children and brand symbolism is reviewed and main concepts from Consumer Culture Theory introduced. A two-stage qualitative study involving 148 children aged 7-11 is designed using group discussions and a novel cork-board sorting exercise. Findings from group discussions with 56 children in stage 2 of the study are analysed from a Consumer Culture Theory perspective.

Findings
The analysis focuses on two aspects of the ways in which children use brand symbols in their everyday lives: their fluid interpretations of ‘cool’ in relation to brand symbols; and the constitution of gender in children’s talk about iconic brands, notably on ‘torturing Barbie’.

Research Limitations/Implications
A key aim of this paper is to critique an existing framework and introduce an alternative perspective, so the analysis offered is necessarily partial at this stage. Future research could also use a Consumer Culture Approach to investigate the role of brands in the everyday lives of children with differential access to financial resources; children from different ethnic groups and children from different parts of the world.

Practical Implications
The introduction of a new framework for researching children and brands offers a host of possibilities for academics and practitioners to understand the effects of brand symbols on the lives of to-day’s children including a more informed approach to socially responsible marketing. This is also the first study to apply Consumer Culture Theory to children’s consumption behaviour. Studying consumption practice from the child’s viewpoint offers exciting new angles for the development of this theoretical perspective.

Key Words
Children, Brands, Piaget, Consumer Culture Theory, Developmental Psychology

Classification
Research Paper
Children’s Use of Brand Symbolism:  
A Consumer Culture Theory Approach

Objective

This paper has two key objectives. Firstly it offers a critique of the Piagetian psychological model of cognitive development that dominates research on children and brand symbols in the mainstream marketing literature. Secondly it proposes an alternative approach to studying children’s relationship with brands: namely Consumer Culture Theory (henceforth CCT). Analysis of a qualitative study involving 148 children aged 7 to 11 is presented which indicates that CCT provides access to the dynamic and complex social roles that brands play in children’s everyday lives, which is not possible using the cognitive development model.

The paper is organised as follows: firstly the key literature on children and brand symbolism is briefly reviewed, followed by an account of the main concepts of CCT. The methodology of the empirical research is then discussed and some of the main findings are interpreted from a CCT perspective. The paper ends by suggesting avenues for future research on children’s relationships with key brands in terms of their role in everyday life, and a brief discussion of the implications of this work for practitioners.

Research on Children’s Use of Brand Symbolism

The mainstream marketing literature on children’s understanding of brands is underpinned almost exclusively by psychological theories of cognitive development, in particular the work of Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1960). According to Piagetian theory, the child’s mental and interactive capacities evolve in a linear fashion through a set of pre-determined stages that John (1999) summarises as: the “perceptual” stage (age 3-7); the “analytical” stage (age 7-11); and the “reflective” stage (age 11-16). The pre-eminence of this paradigm has led to a preponderance
in the best marketing journals of studies that aim to ascertain the effect of a child’s age on the emergence and use of brand meanings (John, 1999).

One of the earliest works on children’s use of consumption symbolism was Belk et al.’s 1982 study comparing the abilities of U.S. children in four age categories (preschool, 7-8, 11-12, 13-14) as well as college students and adults to assign a variety of houses and cars (varied by size, style, age and cost) to different types of people. The researchers concluded that consumption symbolism recognition develops during grade school. The assumption underpinning this study is that adults somehow have the “right” interpretation of brand symbols and that, as they develop cognitively, children learn to see the world “correctly”, following the lines of adults’ perceptions. The commodities under scrutiny (ie. cars and houses) are purchase categories with which children – at least in 1982 – had limited involvement. However, despite its limitations, this study has been highly influential in shaping subsequent marketing research on the development of consumption symbolism. In a second study with children aged 9/10 and 11/12, Belk et al. (1984) altered the ‘target’ products to those that were more likely to be familiar to children (ie. jeans, bicycles, shoes and video games) in response to comments on the 1982 paper. Whilst this psychological approach has undeniable benefits, it cannot shed much light on the meanings and uses of specific brands for children in relation to the social and cultural contexts of their everyday lives. It also tends to reinforce a picture of children’s relatively traditional uses of brand symbolism, and has difficulty in keeping pace with the rapidly changing marketing and branding worlds inhabited by children. For example, there are some recent indications that children’s experience and understanding of brands is shaped by ‘new’ media such as the internet, as well as more ‘traditional’ forms such as TV and radio (Kenway and Bullen, 2001) and, on a more fundamental level that new media may shape the way in which children think and learn (Greenfield, 2006).
More recently Achereiner and John (2003) examined children’s use of brand symbolism in another experimental study. Children in three age categories (8, 12 and 16) were shown pictures of one pair of trainers and one pair of jeans, identified as from preferred and non-preferred brands (Levis or Nike and Kmart respectively) and asked to complete three tasks: (a) evaluate the product; (b) give impressions of the type of person who would own the product; and (c) evaluate five brand extensions for each preferred brand (e.g. Nike shampoo or Levis shoes). The researchers concluded that 8 year olds did not use conceptual brand meanings as a basis for their product perceptions, but used simpler perceptual recognition cues, compared to older children.

We concur with Achereiner and John’s recommendation that more research with children across this age range is needed. However, we would argue that our understanding of how contemporary children relate to brands is unlikely to be substantially enhanced by a sole reliance on the cognitive development model or an experimental methodology. Whilst accepting the important contribution of developmentalism, there are three main reasons to broaden the research framework used in the academic marketing community’s understanding of children’s relationships with brands. First, the Piagetian model concentrates almost exclusively on chronological age, and other non-age related factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class are also likely to influence how children interact with the symbolic realm of consumption. Second, the developmentalist approach adopts a predominantly cognitive perspective, paying relatively little attention to the social dynamics of interpretation, emotion or peer group influence. Third, this approach tends to conceptualise children as frozen in time and isolated from broader social and cultural influences. Minimal attention is paid to recent changes in marketing and branding practice towards children, and this is a major oversight.
given the dramatic intensification of pre-teen children’s exposure to commercially sponsored media both in Europe (Verrept and Gardiner, 2000) and North America (Shor, 2004). We would like to propose CCT as an alternative way of framing research into children’s relationships with brands and provide a brief overview of this perspective below.

**Consumer Culture Theory**

Arnould and Thompson (2005) have used the term Consumer Culture Theory to refer to “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.” (p. 868). CCT views consumption as continually shaped by on-going interactions within a dynamic socio-cultural context, and is concerned with the factors that shape the experiences and identities of consumers “in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life.” (p. 875). The CCT approach has an interest in the operation and influence of ‘consumer culture’, as denoted by “a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (p.869).

CCT has emerged from a different epistemological perspective to the Piagetian model, generating a different set of research foci and methodological practices. CCT does not view individual consumers as making rational choices in the context of ‘free’ markets. Instead, it has drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1984), Foucault (1974) and others to examine the ideological context in which consumption takes place. That is, individual consuming subjects are viewed as operating within a cultural, economic and political frame that shapes and limits how we can think, feel and act in the contemporary marketplace (eg. Holt, 1997; Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2002; Fournier, 1988). As such, CCT tends to be associated with in-depth
qualitative analyses of consumers’ perspectives, as they “actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p.871).

Arnould and Thompson argue that CCT has advanced knowledge in four research domains: (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistorical patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies” (2005, p.871). In this paper we present an exploration of children’s uses of brand symbolism that contributes to the first and third of those research areas. That is, we examine the ways that the marketplace provides an important arena in which children construct narratives of identity around gender, and explore the important role that brand symbolism, in relation to the concept of ‘cool’, plays in children’s everyday social interactions. Taking CCT as our frame of reference, our study was designed in the spirit of discovering how children themselves, in the messy context of their everyday lives, adopt, adapt and assign meanings to brands. Moreover, although there have been studies involving teenage participants using the framework of CCT (eg. Ritson and Elliot, 1999; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Thornton, 1996), there have been no studies involving children under 11 or 12. Thus we hope that our research may also provide a contribution to Consumer Culture Theory itself.

The Study

Research Design – Stage 1

Acknowledging a gap in the literature identified by Achereiner and John (2003) we chose to work with children of junior school age (i.e. 7-11). In line with a CCT approach of understanding experience from the perspective of a specific group, the first stage of our
research was designed to ensure that the consumption objects studied were those which children saw as meaningful to them and not those adults thought would be meaningful to children. With permission from schools, parents and the children themselves, we held 30 minute brainstorming sessions with a total of 72 children (12 groups of 6 children), drawn in equal numbers from two different schools from a small city in the UK. We chose one private and one state school and in each school half of the groups were from Year 3 (age 7/8) and half from Year 6 (age 10/11); a third of the groups were girls only; a third boys only and a third mixed gender. This gave us a range of social settings in which significant children’s brands could be identified.

Each brainstorming session was activated by the question “what things are kids in your class into at the moment?” Ideas were captured on a flip chart with lists of brand names generated for generic product suggestions. Discussion proceeded by creating lists of liked and hated (“cool” and “not cool”) brands. Our dataset consisted of the flip charts of “things kids are into”, the classified lists of brands and 170 single-spaced A4 pages of verbatim transcriptions of the children’s discussions. Two researchers independently analysed the scripts, lists and flip charts and together selected the 14 brands mentioned most consistently across groups and which generated most excitement, interest and debate. These were used as the stimuli for second part of the study (see table 1).

We anticipated that clothes, shoes (especially trainers) and food outlets might figure prominently as significant brands in these discussions. However, some of the most heated and resonant exchanges involved sports celebrities, pop stars and TV shows. As a consequence, ‘branded celebrities’ such as David Beckham and Britney Spears figure in our list of branded items for use in stage 2 of the research, but other well-known brands such as Nike, Levis and
McDonalds do not. This relatively unexpected finding may reflect the greater importance of clothes and trainers amongst older age groups (Croghan et al., 2006), and also children’s pervasive and taken-for-granted view of iconic celebrities from the fields of sport, pop music and popular culture as brands in themselves (Parker and Steinberg, 2004). The selection of brands also reflects some gender differences in children’s responses during stage 1 of the study, in that boys in both age groups were more likely to mention games consoles such as Playstation compared to girls (Nairn et al., 2006).

Research Design – Stage 2

Stage 2 took place 6 months after stage 1 in the same school year, in the same two schools, involving the same two age groups. The children participating in stage 2 were not necessarily those who had taken part in stage 1 owing to logistical impossibility of contacting the same children without compromising the anonymity of the participants. Of course, the children participating in stage 2 might have generated a somewhat different set of branded objects from the stage 1 participants, but their generally enthusiastic involvement in the stage 2 discussions implied that this was not the case.

Our data collection methodology for stage 2 was a form of phenomenological interview which Thompson et al. (1989) describe as “perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experience” (p. 138). A total of 56 children (16 groups of 3 or 4 children) took part in the discussions. The phenomenological interview or discussion aims to capture a first-person experience. Thus apart from the opening question, the course of the discussion is set by the respondents (Thompson et al., 1989, pg. 139). The researcher simply presented each group with a picture of each of the 14 brands in turn and asked “what do you think of …?” The ensuing exchanges between the children formed the first half of the
discussion agenda. The second half involved a group sorting task. It had become clear from the stage 1 discussions that the favourability of a brand (whether or not it was “cool”) was a highly contested terrain. In stage 2 the children were given small pictures of the 14 brands and asked, as a group, to place the pictures on a cork board labeled “cool” on one side and “not cool” on the other. This task allowed us to observe the process by which a group of peers negotiated the meaning of the consumption objects that form a part of their everyday lives. The task elicited heated debate, high levels of involvement and rich discussion. With parental, school and children’s permission we videoed stage 2 discussions in order to provide a fuller picture of the social interactions involved in the cork board sorting task.

In line with our CCT approach we felt that it was crucial to understand the group processes by which children interact with the commercial world. As noted by Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 869): “the term “consumer culture” (also) conceptualizes an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members’ experiences and lives (Kozinets 2001). These meanings are embodied and negotiated by consumers in particular social situations roles and relationships.” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869, our italics).

Although, as noted by Munday (2006) group interviews or focus groups are particularly useful for studying phenomena involving process as well as content, this methodology does have drawbacks. Individuals may feel peer pressure and the group may be dominated by forceful children whose views colour collective opinion. We used a number of methods to obviate these problems. First, the group size was very small (3 or 4 children) which made it less intimidating even for the very shy to voice their opinion; second, group members were drawn from the same class (of around 20 children) which meant they were already comfortable with
each other; third, during the discussion the researcher ensured that all children were given the opportunity to contribute; and fourth, in the sorting task the researcher ensured that the pictures were handed out to the children in turn which meant that each child had equal access to the power afforded by physically holding an object. Analysis of the body language in the videos and a word count of the contribution made by each child indicate that the transcripts represent a balance of views from all members. Moreover, as we conducted 16 groups (a large number for most qualitative research purposes) the effects of one or two dominant individuals in the whole text was minimized.

Our dataset consisted of 390 double spaced A4 pages of verbatim discussion transcript; over 8 hours of video footage; and 16 still photos of the final positions of the brand pictures on the cork boards.

Analysis

Three researchers separately conducted a qualitative thematic discourse analysis of the 390 pages of transcript, using video footage for clarification of tone of voice or placement of pictures on the board. The analysis was based on the hermeneutic circle (Bleicher, 1980) which involves an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy by which the researchers developed a holistic understanding of each individual group discussion transcript, while noting similarities and differences across age groups, gender and schools. The researchers met on several occasions to discuss the global themes emerging from the totality of the body of the children’s discourse. The themes identified are contained in table 2. These are not, of course, exhaustive descriptions of how all children relate to these brands; the themes are not even an exhaustive catalogue of every theme in the 390 pages of text. However, for the purposes of
exploring an application to CCT to children’s negotiation of brand symbols the emergent themes are extremely fecund starting point.

Table 2. Children and Brands: Global Themes

| The major benefit a brand can provide is entertainment and fun. |
| Pop stars, sports idols, electronics, toys, TV shows and TV adverts exist as equally valid sources of entertainment. |
| “Cool” is a highly negotiated concept which does not adhere to an object or person in a straightforward manner. |
| The nature of brands is deeply gendered. |
| Acceptance or rejection of specific brands serves to symbolise rites of passage or group membership. |
| Some brands (notably Barbie) are capable of evoking intense hatred and violence. |
| Brands (particularly branded celebrities) can be used to experiment with moral argument. |
| Advertising is a form of entertainment. |
| Blatant hard-sell commercialism is viewed with suspicion and negativity. |
| Inauthenticity by a marketing organisation or by a branded celebrity is derided. |
| In addition to entertainment value, brands must also offer product quality and value for money. |
| Brands are an integral part of a commercially produced fashion cycle. |
| The marketing activities of popular brands are re-enacted within children’s own social environments. |
| A conflict exists between the discourse of brand marketing and the discourse of teachers and parents. |

Brands for these 7-11 year olds were primarily viewed as potential sources of entertainment and fun with little discrimination made between their perceived forms. Thus a famous football player, a TV advert for beer, a doll or a games console all promise equal possibilities for stimulating enjoyment. However, the process by which the children designated brands as “cool” or “uncool” was highly complex and contested; deeply gendered; and imbued with symbolic group membership display rituals. As such, some brands could be emotionally charged to the extent of becoming the objects of hatred and violence as witnessed by recurrent discourses relating to the torturing of Barbie’s. Brands could also provide the focus of moral debate with children actively exchanging views on the rights and wrongs of the behaviour of branded celebrities such as David Beckham. In addition to the symbolic status of brands, the children were also concerned with a brand’s material quality and value for money. Linked to
this commercial awareness, much of children’s discourse around brands related not to the objects themselves but to the way in which they are marketed and advertised. Children displayed overt cynicism towards heavy-handed commercialism or perceived inauthenticity in organisations or individuals yet, exhibiting a sophisticated understanding of how marketers exploit the fashion cycle for profitable gain, they emulate this in playground activity.

Throughout the groups, children’s discourses revealed that their re-enactment of commercial practice continually came into conflict with the citizenship values promoted by their school teachers.

In this paper we concentrate on three of the themes listed above: children’s moves to reframe the concept of cool in the cork-board sorting task and the constitution of gender in children’s talk about brands which, in turn, is linked with their accounts of torturing Barbie.

“Is there a middle side?”: Subverting the search for ‘cool’

Bourdieu’s influential study of consumption practices amongst the French working class and bourgeoisie, and the disciplines involved in learning what constitutes (good) ‘taste’ is relevant to our interpretation of children’s relationship to the slippery concept of ‘cool’ (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather like (good) ‘taste’, cool can only be understood in the context of the dynamic complexity of social interactions. Marketers (and academic researchers) frequently misunderstand this as they struggle to identify the newest object or cultural practice that is presumed to epitomise ‘cool’ (Moore, 2005; Nancarrow et al., 2002). Our study indicates that what constitutes ‘cool’ is produced socially in specific cultural contexts: the more you search for it, the more it dissolves into air. Like ‘taste’, the whole point about ‘cool’ is that knowledge about what is (and is not) ‘cool’ serves to separate a discerning elite from the uninformed masses.
By asking children to identify iconic branded commodities as ‘cool’ or ‘not cool’, we were treading on this very sensitive terrain (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). The cork board sorting task asked children to make a relatively straightforward distinction between objects that were viewed as ‘cool’ and those that were not. In many instances, children subverted our sorting task by generating a mid-point between ‘cool’ and ‘not cool’ on the cork board. A typical first reaction to the cork board sorting task in 14 out of the 16 discussion groups was: “Is there a middle side?” (11 year old girl, private school). For our participants the notion of ‘cool’ was a dynamic, complex and contradictory concept that did not necessarily adhere to specific objects or people in a straightforward way. In discussion groups children sometimes mobilised this notion of the ‘middle side’ to solve potential difficulties that might arise if there was no consensus about where to place an item; in order to be ‘fair’ and reflect all shades of opinion; and the middle category was sometimes used when the line between ‘cool’ and ‘non-cool’ was treated as a continuum. The use of a middle column to resolve potential conflict and in order to be ‘fair’ is reflected in this discussion 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)

Sometimes children’s discussions included the presumed opinions of people beyond the small group doing the exercise. Thus in one Year 6 group the children decide to put Barbie and Action Man ‘in the middle’ because “for our age they’re not cool”:

**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:** 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)

Of course, it could be argued that children’s reactions to the notion of ‘cool’ exemplified in the interview extracts quoted above represents little more than their responses to our cork board sorting task. However, their talk also reflected the ephemeral nature of ‘cool’ as part of the constantly changing world of fashion and style. We focus here on the uneasy relationship between ‘coolness’ and popularity. According to this discourse, if too many people liked something then it lost its cool cachet, as illustrated by this discussion of Pokemon below:

Boy 1: Pokemon’s not bad.

Interviewer:  Uh-huh.

Boy 2: It’s sort of, well, coz

Boy 3: Peekachu

Boy 2: Um, loads of people have got them so it’s not really cool anymore.

(Year 3, state school, boys group)

This discursive construction of cool as linked to fashion cycles is, of course, highly profitable, and is traded on and encouraged by marketers (Klein, 2000; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Some of the older children recognised the commercial potential of the relationship between ‘cool’ and the fashion cycle.

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 Yu-Gi-Oh 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)
In other words, coolness has a shelf life, which it then lays onto branded commodities. However, branded commodities that move out of fashion are likely to lose economic value, yet they might one day come back ‘in’ and once again be worth money. The children here repeat a pervasive discourse in which the ‘coolness’ and popularity of specific branded commodities are located in a cycle that is locked in time.

**Tomboys and Torturing Barbie: An everyday story of gendered consumer practice**

It was apparent throughout all the focus groups that gender played a significant role in shaping discussion about branded commodities. In the extracts below, 7 to 8 year olds 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. ‘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”.

**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, mixed group, private school)

**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, 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, girls group)
Our study also supports Renold’s findings that the position of the tomboy ceased to be available to girls as they moved towards puberty (Renold, 2005). The conversations of the Year 6 children were still highly gendered, but the position of “tomboy” began to be disparaged as an indication of lesbianism (Griffin et al., 2006). In this way the children’s talk about everyday consumer objects served to reinforce the traditional distinction between masculinity and femininity, and policed the path to heterosexual ‘normality’. This was one area in which there were clear differences between the accounts of children in the two age groups.

The influence of feminism and Foucault’s work on CCT draws our attention to the establishment of power relations through discursive practices in people’s talk (Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Foucault, 1974, 1978). This was clearest in children’s accounts of torturing Barbie. Barbie was unequivocally identified as “not cool” in the strongest terms, inspiring discourses of rejection, hatred and physical violence, as the following comments show:

**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

(Year 3, private 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.

[Boy continues to hide his eyes and boy 2 keeps his back to the interviewer whilst talking]

(Year 3, state school, boys group)
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 you

Interviewer: They’re not particularly cool unless you what?

Girl 1: Torture them.

(Year 6 girls, private school, girls group)

In other discussions, boys in both age groups accounted for their vehement rejection of Barbie in terms of the doll’s association with girls and femininity: “I think it’s all about little girls, princesses” (Year 6, private school, boys group); “I’ll tell you why it’s sick. It’s for girls” (Year 3, private school, boys group). The children’s talk about the mass destruction of Barbies can also be read (especially for girls) as a rejection of hyper-femininity, as epitomised by “girly girls”. In the extract below, a group of Year 3 girls try to disentangle the concepts of femininity (“sissies”) and the infantile (“babies”), and Girl 3 draws on the notion of the hyper-feminine “girly girl” to denote a typical Barbie fan:

Interviewer: What kind of people like Barbie?

Girl 1: Babies

Girl 2: Sissies

Girl 3: Girls, um, not babies, but really girly girls

(Year 3, private school, girls group)

Limitations

The primary purpose of this paper has been to introduce CCT as an alternative framework through which to study children and brands. Since we have only been able to explore two aspects of the data in this paper, it is only possible to give a flavour of the potential contribution that CCT might bring to our understanding of children’s uses of brand symbolism. We have addressed some variations in relation to age and gender, especially regarding the complex constructions of masculinity and femininity, but have not been able to consider issues
of ethnicity, social class or differential access to financial resources, the potential influence of parents or siblings, or children’s uses of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, and these are important areas for further research.

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research**

This paper has offered a critique of the developmentalist paradigm within which most research on children and brands has been conducted to date. Beyond this, our research indicates the potential value of CCT in demonstrating that children’s uses of brand symbols play an important role in their social relations and cultural lives. The notion of ‘cool’ in particular is a dynamic and highly contested terrain, and brand symbolism is deeply gendered, operating as a key domain through which girls and boys negotiate gendered identities. We have developed an innovative qualitative methodology designed to understand the roles played by brands in the everyday contexts of children’s lives, including a novel “cork board exercise” created to understand children’s interactive talk around brand symbolism. There clearly remains an urgent need for further research on children’s uses of brand symbolism, and in our view CCT has the potential to make a substantial contribution to consumer research, and also to our understanding of child development and socialisation processes more generally (Martens et al., 2004). In addition, children and young people have begun to use newer technologies to “distribute” their voices and views in ways that they enjoy” via their own websites, online ‘zines and networking sites such as myspace.com (Kenway and Bullen, 2001, p.181), and this is a challenging area for further research.

**Implications for Practitioners**

Children are a major market for commercial organizations. 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). We suggest that practitioner insight into this market may be enhanced by recognising not only the cognitive-developmental domain of childhood but also the social and cultural context in which children’s uses of consumer goods is embedded, for our study indicates that branded products play an important role in children’s everyday social networks and cultural practices. In terms of practical research techniques we hope to have shown the value of in-depth qualitative analysis and observational methods to understand the ways in which brands are ‘naturally’ enmeshed in children’s everyday discourses and social interactions. This may be of particular use in the practice of “cool-hunting” which currently does not tend to take into account the highly negotiated and contested nature of “cool”. Beyond this, the CCT approach may also help practitioners engage more fully with the current and increasingly important debates on socially responsible marketing to children. To date, arguments have revolved around the possibility and viability of restricting (or banning) adverts for particular products aimed at children and have tended to rest on the Piagetian cognitive-developmental paradigm outlined at the start of this paper. Whilst we would not deny the value of the Piagetian model, our research indicates that this is far from the whole story. Socially responsible marketing to children must be informed by a full range of research on children’s consumption involving commercial organisations, policy makers and researchers. Outright bans on marketing to children are unlikely to be sufficient in themselves: a more productive and responsible strategy would be to embed culturally-informed and socially responsible practices within all marketing to children.
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<th><strong>Table 1: The 14 brands selected for discussion in stage 2</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Busted</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>McFly</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Britney Spears</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>David Beckham</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Simpsons</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Barbie</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bratz</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Action Man</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Beyblades</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pokemon</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Playstation, X-Box, Game Cube</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yu-Gi-Oh</strong></td>
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