# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

**Girly Girls, Tomboys and Micro-Waving Barbie: Child and Youth Consumption and the Disavowal of Femininity**

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# Girly Girls, Tomboys and Micro-waving Barbie: Child and Youth Consumption and the Disavowal of Femininity

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper we draw on work arising from three research projects concerned with the relationship between consumption and identity for children (aged 7 to 11), young people (aged 11 to 17) and young adults (aged 18 to 25) to examine issues relevant to the constitution of contemporary femininity in British society. Rather than treating femininity as having a dominant stereotypical form that girls and young women can conform to or resist, we argue that it is more fruitful to view femininity as a difficult if not impossible space for girls or young women to occupy successfully. We illustrate this with reference to girls' and boys' talk about 'girly girls' and 'tomboys' in two studies of child and teen consumption, girls' and boys' accounts of torturing Barbie, and young women's talk about the importance of not 'drinking like a girl' in a study of social identity, branding and the meanings of alcohol consumption for young adults.*

## INTRODUCTION: FEMININITY AS AN IMPOSSIBLE SPACE

In their influential article applying some of the key tenets of feminist theory to consumer research, Julia Bristor and Eileen Fischer argued that: "gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered" (1993, p.519). There is now an expanding body of work on the complex relationship between consumption, gender and identity that cuts across several academic disciplines (eg. Schroeder, 2003; McRobbie, 2004; Harris, 2004; O'Donohoe and Bartholomew, 2006). If consumption activities are fundamentally gendered, consumption practices also play a key role in the constitution, reproduction and transformation of identities, and gender is a central organizing feature of identity (Schroeder, 2003; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004).

In this paper we examine the role of consumption in the constitution of contemporary femininity for girls and young women. Rather than treating

femininity as having a dominant stereotypical form that girls and young women can conform to or resist, we argue that it is more fruitful to view femininity as an impossible space for girls or young women to occupy successfully (Griffin, 2005). One way of illustrating this is to frame it in terms of the hypothetical question "what do you say if a boy asks you for sex?" If a girl says "no" she is likely to be condemned as frigid or a lesbian, and if she says "yes" she is likely to be viewed as a 'slag'. 'Nice girls' are likely to be condemned as boring and 'no fun', so there is no 'right' answer to this question (Griffin, 1982). That is, there is no clear-cut representation of appropriate femininity to which girls and young women might aspire (or reject): rather, contemporary femininity is constituted through a series of multiple and frequently competing discourses, which position girls and young women in different ways, and are shaped by class and 'race' as well as gender and sexuality (Griffin, 2004). In addition, femininity may also be constructed in relation to a canonical narrative in which femininity itself is disavowed and allied to 'babyish-ness'.

Consumption processes play a key role in the constitution of contemporary femininity and in forming the impossible space that girls and young women struggle to find a way to occupy. Consumption has long been viewed as a key site through which contemporary forms of femininity (and masculinity) are constituted, reproduced, negotiated and transformed (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). The importance of identity projects to such processes has been stressed by feminists and theorists of neo-liberalism (eg. McRobbie, 2004; Rose,

1990; Schroeder, 2003; Walkerdine, 2004), and more recently by exponents of Consumer Culture Theory (eg. Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In this paper we draw on work arising from three research projects concerned with the relationship between consumption and identity for children (aged 7 to 11), young people (aged 11 to 17) and young adults (aged 18 to 25) to examine issues relevant to the constitution of contemporary femininity in British society. Before turning to consider the role of consumption in the constitution of femininity with reference to our research work, we briefly review recent debates on 'post-feminism' and 'girlpower', in which the figure of the respectable 'nice girl' appears to have been replaced by the contradictory figure of the 'sassy', fun-loving post-feminist female consumer.

## POST-FEMINISM, GIRLPOWER AND THE NEW FEMALE CONSUMING SUBJECT

Feminist theorists have long argued that respectability and (sexual) reputation form key dimensions of contemporary femininity (eg. Skeggs, 1997). However, 'nice' respectable femininity is distinctly racialised and class-specific, marked as white and middle class, making it an even more impossible space for young working class women or young women from minority ethnicities to occupy (Skeggs, 1997; Mirza, 1992). The emergence of 'second-wave' feminism during the second half of the 20th century posed a number of challenges to the dominance of respectable femininity, and mainstream cultural discourse responded by incorporating elements of feminist rhetoric. Such cultural shifts are reflected in the pervasive discourses of 'post-

feminism' (McRobbie, 2004), 'girlpower' (Griffin, 2001; Harris, 2004) and the ubiquitous figure of the 'ladette' (Jackson and Tinkler, 2005).

One of several responses to second wave feminism is the discourse of 'girlpower' (Harris, 2004). Like so many discourses around girlhood and femininity, 'girlpower' is characterised by profound contradiction. In its most popular and pervasive form as articulated around the manufactured British pop group the Spice Girls, 'girlpower' appeared to endorse and value female friendships, even over and above the pressure to get (and bother about) boyfriends. 'Girlpower' appeared to promise an all-female world of fun, sassiness and dressing up to please your (girl) self. The discourse of 'girlpower' is represented as 'post-feminist', constituting feminism as simultaneously self-evident and redundant, thereby silencing feminist voices through a discourse that appears to be 'pro-feminist' (Griffin, 2001, 2004). In practice, 'girlpower' was and is fundamentally constituted through consumption, with a distinctive style involving lots of make-up, glitter and wearing tight clothes. Wearing tight T-shirts and crop tops might be excluding for any girl or young woman who feels at all self-conscious about the size and shape of her body, which is likely to be a majority (Grogan, 1999).

Arguably a second reflection of the 'mainstreaming' of feminist discourse is the figure of the 'ladette', associated with young women in their late teens and early twenties rather than with pre-teen girls. 'Ladettes' are also constituted in part through consumption practices – in this case drinking alcohol, which is represented as a rejection of traditional respectable femininity. In a study of representations of young women in popular media over the past 80 years, Carolyn Jackson and Penny Tinkler (2005) argue that 'ladettes' are portrayed as hedonistic, driven by their interest in partying and having fun, characterised in particular by heavy drinking and smoking. This is confirmed by the definition of the 'ladette' in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "a young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking sessions". Jackson and Tinkler refute the suggestion that this is a totally new phenomenon, pointing to equally disapproving representations of 'modern girls' in the popular press of 1920s Britain. 'Ladettes' are frequently represented as taking over male preserves such as heavy drinking, but not as trying to be men. They are also represented as definitely not 'girly' (Williams, 2003), and as avoiding any taint of 'nice' respectable femininity. Jackson and Tinkler characterise 'ladettes' as a contemporary version of 'slags': troublesome young women, 'folk devils' and reflections of undesirable forms of femininity.

Like the sassy girl at the heart of the discourse of girlpower, 'ladettes' are characterised as a reflection of a 'post-feminist' world. Whilst 'ladettes' are represented as a lamentable and unfortunate consequence of feminism, 'girlpower' is generally represented in a more positive light. The challenge that 'ladettes' are seen to pose to the dominant discourse of respectable femininity rests on their apparent display of practices associated with masculinity, especially drinking pints of lager. Whilst the 'sassy girl' of the girlpower discourse is represented as more overtly

aspirational than hedonistic, she is also resolutely individualistic and narcissistic rather than a reflection of traditionally respectable femininity. The notion of using consumption practices to please your (female) self and not caring about what others think of you characterises both the figure of the 'ladette' and the 'sassy girl' (Griffin, 2004). If these figures have dominated popular cultural discourses around femininity and consumption during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century in affluent western societies, what sort of terms and discourses do girls and young women draw on in constituting contemporary femininity and identity positions? The figures of the 'ladette' and the 'sassy girl' scarcely appeared to figure in the talk of the girls and young women we interviewed as part of the three projects discussed below. However, their talk did reflect a lack of any clear sense of what position they might aspire to occupy as female subjects.

## "GET EVERYTHING YOU WANT (NOW)": FEMININITY, CONSUMPTION AND FEMINISM

In 'First World' markets, young people constitute (and are constituted as) an increasingly significant group of consumers, with girls and young women comprising an important segment of that population. However, girls' and young women's relation to consumption will be shaped in part by their financial position and access to money, but also by the availability (or lack) of subject positions in contemporary discourses around consumption that resonate with their everyday lives (Skeggs, 1997). In addition, the subject position of the consuming girl is not of equivalent relevance for all girls and young women: it is profoundly shaped by class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. Girls and young women are generally represented as having (or being) too little or too much; as too fat or too thin, too clever or too stupid, too free or too restricted (Griffin, 2004; Walkerdine, 2004). The desiring subject is also a dissatisfied subject, and in the case of femininity, the primary focus of that dissatisfaction is constituted as within the self. Contemporary femininity appears to be an impossible project, caught between competing forces, in a permanent state of dissatisfaction or desire, surrounded by idealised representations of itself, and simultaneously invisible. And yet, of course, the lives of girls and young women frequently belie the pessimism of such representations. We explore this with reference to material from three recent research projects: one on the meanings of brands and commodities for junior school-age children; the second on the relationship between consumption and identity for teenagers; and the third on the meanings of alcohol consumption for young adults. We recognise the importance of specific contexts (including the immediate context of the research interview) for shaping respondents' accounts, but there is also some benefit in exploring issues across related research projects.

The Child Consumers Study (1)

The Child Consumers study aims to understand the meanings of key products and brands from the perspective of children aged 7 to 11. To date the Research Team (CG, AN and PGW) have undertaken two sets of focus group interviews in two junior schools in a

small city in the South West of England. In Stage 1 (October 2004) we interviewed 72 children in 12 groups of 6 children from Year 3 (age 7–8) and Year 6 (age 10-11) in one private and one state school. One third of the discussion groups were girls only, one third were boys only, and one third were mixed sex. In Stage 1 children were asked to generate the names of products, brands and media (eg. TV shows, adverts) that were meaningful to them. In Stage 2 (March 2005), we interviewed a further 56 children in 16 groups of 3 or 4 children in the same two schools. In this instance one quarter of the groups were girls only, one quarter boys only and half were mixed sex. The two year groups were selected to represent the youngest and oldest classes in British junior schools, and their ages fall approximately on either side of what is taken as a key developmental stage in children's understanding of advertising, branding and consumer culture (Achenreiner and Roedder John, 2003), and the CC study is partly intended as a critique of this developmentalist model (Nairn et al., 2006). In the Stage 2 interviews, we selected 12 items that had emerged in Stage 1 as particularly meaningful for children, and asked respondents to discuss each item before asking them to identify which items were 'cool' or 'not cool' in a group exercise involving attaching pictures of each item to a cork board. The interview extracts quoted below are taken from Stage 2 of this study, all conducted by Patricia Gaya Wickes.

The Young Consumers study (2)

The Young Consumers study aimed to investigate the ways in which young people's views on consumption and its relationship to youth identities intersect with patterns of negotiation with parents over resources within households. The study was split between Milton Keynes, Oxford and Birmingham. Seven schools and one 6th Form College participated in the Birmingham part of the study, along with seven schools from the Milton Keynes area and three schools from the Oxford area. Thus the study involved young people aged between 12-13 and 15-18 from a range of class and ethnic backgrounds. A variety of research methods were employed, including questionnaires on the meanings young people associated with consuming certain products, involving 1350 young people in all. This was followed by a series of 60 informal group discussions with 335 young people that we carried out in the participating schools, exploring the issues covered in the questionnaires in greater depth. The extracts quoted below are taken from transcripts of those interviews that were conducted in 2002 and 203 by Janine Hunter and Rosaleen Croghan. We also distributed disposable cameras to some young people and asked them to photograph their favourite possessions, carried out interviews with 20 parents of teenagers, and conducted 11 observational case studies involving young people involved in activities related to consumption (Phoenix, 2005).

The Young People and Alcohol study (3)

This project is a qualitative study of the meanings associated with alcohol consumption for young adults aged 18 to 25 in three locations: a large city in the

English Midlands, and a market town and a seaside town in the South West of England. The research is in its early stages and will involve an analysis of contemporary alcohol adverts, group discussions with young adults of diverse backgrounds in the three research sites, and observational ethnographic case studies of young adults' drinking practices. Initial pilot work for this project involved a series of interviews about the meanings of alcohol consumption amongst university students carried out by undergraduate students as part of a Research Methods course taught by Christine Griffin at the University of Bath in 2003-4, and findings from these preliminary interviews will be discussed later in this paper.

## 'GIRLY GIRLS' AND 'TOMBOYS': NEGOTIATING CONTEMPORARY FEMININITIES

Two of the main gendered categories we found reflected in the talk of girls (and boys) in the Child Consumers study and the Young Consumers project were 'girly girls' and 'tomboys', which had different connotations for different groups of girls. Recent research with girls and young women from a range of social class and ethnic backgrounds points to a pervasive distinction made by young people between 'girly girls' and 'tomboys' (Renold, 2005). Renold argued that the 9 to 11 year old white girls from working class and middle class backgrounds that she interviewed positioned themselves in different ways in relation to the possible identity positions of 'tomboys' and 'girlie girls'. The positions of 'tomboy' and 'girly girl' were defined in part through consumption patterns, in terms of what

girls wore, their appearance and their relationship to key gendered commodities such as Barbie. So 'tomboys' were identified (and identified themselves) through their clothing and appearance (wearing 'boys' clothes'), their dislike of Barbie, their rejection of femininity and 'girly girls', their involvement in sports and their mixing with boys. Throughout all of these discussions, masculinity remained the unmarked norm against which 'tomboys', 'moshers' and 'girly girls' were located.

A related interview study involved young working class women of minority ethnicities aged 14 to 15 who were officially defined as being 'at risk' of dropping out of education. These girls referred to themselves as being 'proper boys' and as 'turning into girls' as they grew older (Halsall et al., 2005). This transformation was reflected in the girls' clothing and appearance, as they gave detailed accounts of the clothes, make-up and hairstyles associated with being "a proper boy" and other aspects of appearance that could be taken as evidence of "turning into a girl". For some of these young women, being "a proper boy" or a "tomboy" were associated with an anti-school ethos, and being "girly" or a "girly girl" with being "a goody goody" in school. However, Halsall and colleagues argue that "there is no straightforward dichotomy of a pro-education femininity or an anti-education femininity – and there is no simple 'ladette' resistance to education" (2005, p.2). These young women also distanced themselves from the 'girly girls' who were represented as being obsessed with consumption and their appearance, representing what Halsall and colleagues referred to as examples of "ultra-femininity".

Renold's study indicates some of the ways in which white girls may disrupt hetero-normative gender scripts, but such strategies may only be available to pre-teen girls. As Renold argues: "the queer possibilities of the 'tomboy' subject position are temporally bound in middle childhood" and this becomes an increasingly repudiated category as girls grow older (2005, p.11). This age-related shift in uses of the subject positions of 'girly girl' and 'tomboy' was in evidence in our interviews:

Int (PGW):  First of all, what about Pokemon cards?
Boy 1: I think they're cool
Girl 1: I don't cos I'm a girl
Int:  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, mixed group, private school: CC study: all white)


Int (PGW):And you girls, you don't like them? (Action Man)
Girl 1: No cos they're for boys
Int:  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: CC study: all white)

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 (who was referred to as a commodity by the children, along with Beckham, Busted and McFly). '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'. The consumption of specific gendered commodities is one sign of this gendering process, along with the display of particular gendered styles or behaviours.

In the YC study, respondents elaborated on the distinction between 'girly girls' and 'tomboys' in more depth:
Girl 1: I've always mixed with boys (1) but that's me
Int (JH):But do you think it effects
Girl 2: I just like girls
Girl 1:I think it effects who you are cos if you're a girly girl you're kind of scared of the boys so it's (inaudible) girls but erm no tomboys tend to mix better than these lot mix with the boys
Girl 3: I hang around with the boys round my area
(Year 8 girls, Birmingham school: YC study: G1 is white, G2 Asian & G3 African Caribbean)

In the interview with 12 year old girls quoted above, Girl 1 refers disparagingly to "girly girls", constituting the latter as being scared of boys, allying herself to 'tomboys', who are represented as more able to mix with boys, and (later in the same interview) as spending her money on "footballs and phone top-ups" rather than make-up. In the extract below involving 15 year old girls, "girly girls" are identified in terms of their clothing,

style and appearance alongside sub-cultural style groups such as "Goths" and the more normalized "sporty teenagers":

Girl 1: It's like Goths wear like baggy trousers dark make-up and dark clothes. Then you've got sporty teenagers that wear like tracksuit bottoms and trainers

Girl 2: And then there's girly girls that just wear jeans, boots everyday, nice top

(Year 12 girls, Birmingham school: YC study: G1 & G2 are white)

For the 12 year old girl in the extract quoted below, "tomboy" is constituted as a "stage" that was followed by the sub-cultural style categories "Goth", "Greebo" and "skater", and then by what she presents as her own choice to "be a girl". Being a girl therefore appears as something that girls can become, constituting themselves as girls and signaling this to others through their use of gendered clothing, hairstyles and behaviours and their preference for gendered celebratory commodities such as Britney Spears.

Girl 1: It goes in stages I've gone from tomboy to Goth to Greebo to skater and now I wanna be a girl and I've got all these boys stuff

(Year 8 mixed group, Birmingham school: YC study: white girl)

However, it would be a mistake to assume that 'looking like a boy' was totally acceptable, especially for older groups, as this next extract illustrates:

Girl 1: You definitely changed through the years cos you would have not seen me wearing this would yer in like about 4 years ago I would have had

Girl 2: No you were in joggin' bottoms and a bloody (inaudible)

Girl 1: Cropped hair like I was some little transsexual or something (laughs) people thought that I was gonna turn out a lesbian didn't they?

Girl 2: I don't know what that

Girl 1: You never even knew me

Boy 1: No a massive tomboy

Girl 2: I did

Girl 1: I mean a massive tomboy I swear I come to school like with baggy trousers and everything Kicker boots like proper boys shoes I don't know how mom let me walk out the house like it (laughs) I ask her now she says it's just the way you was I feel embarrassed

(Year 12 mixed group, Birmingham school: YC study: all respondents are white)

Here Girl 1 describes herself (and is described) as "a massive tomboy" to the point of being "like I was some little transsexual" who "might turn out a lesbian". Once again, these identity positions are constituted through references to wearing gendered clothes and shoes: "proper boys' shoes". So whilst it might be relatively acceptable to be a 'tomboy' until the age of around 12, this identity position carries the possibility that the girl might "turn out" a transsexual or a lesbian, which are constituted as negative possibilities to be avoided as a source of embarrassment. The move from being constituted as a "tomboy" or as "looking like a boy", through to "being a girl" was also not without its dangers, since the latter position carried the risk of being viewed as a "tart":

Girl1: If you wear a short skirt

Girl 2: Shows your bum

Girl 1: And like a belly top or something

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Girl 2: Boob tube
Girl 1: People think you know she's a
Girl 2: A tart
Girl 1: A tart or a slut
Girl 2: No but some people ain't like that some people just want it for the rush innit like you wanna like
Girl 3: Dress up
(Year 8 girls group, B'ham Girls' school: YC study: G1 is Asian, G2 & G3 are white)

Growing older and 'becoming a girl' is represented here as a process of wearing different clothes and wearing fewer clothes, revealing more of one's body in a process that was recognized as being both potentially risky and potentially enjoyable. The multiple possible readings associated with wearing revealing clothes like a 'belly top' was acknowledged as these 12 year old girls debated this issue. The girls talked about the risk of being viewed as "a tart or a slut", but countered this with the alternative possibility that "some people ain't like that", and "just want it for the rush" to "dress up": in other words, for their own pleasure as independent female consumers pleasing only themselves.

This notion that "looking like a boy" might be part of a staged development into girlhood has no clear equivalent in relation to masculine subjectivity. The latter is constituted through a strong avoidance of any hint of femininity and as a determinedly heterosexual phenomenon (Herek, 1986). A girl can therefore move from being a tomboy to a Goth, with these treated as two equivalent style categories, but the spectre of 'turning out lesbian' still haunts the process of being and becoming a girl (Griffin, 1982). 'Girly girls' were generally disparaged as too obsessed with their appearance, sometimes as scared of

boys and sometimes as too interested in boys, but frequently despised for being traditionally feminine (Halsall et al., 2005). There were however, some girls who referred to themselves as 'girly' in a celebration of femininity, female friendship and the consumption of 'girly' things. All of the above can be viewed as tactics for positioning their girl-selves in relation to pervasive subject positions associated with femininity and masculinity, including the disavowed position of 'slag', 'tart' or lesbian and other dis-preferred identity positions. However, there were some clear instances in which femininity was associated with babyishness and violent disgust, notably in children's talk about Barbie.

## GIRLY GIRLS, MICRO-WAVING BARBIE AND THE DISAVOWAL OF FEMININITY

A number of studies have explored the negative associations of Barbie for boys in the USA (eg. Rogers, 1993), and in the UK (O'Donohoe and Bartholomew, 2006), but in the Child Consumers project this talk of destroying Barbie was equally prevalent (though not quite as extreme) amongst the girls. The most striking aspect of children's talk about Barbie in the CC study was the rejection, hatred and violence in their accounts. The picture of Barbie evoked practically no positive sentiments – even amongst 7 year old girls (Nairn et al., 2006).

Int (PGW): 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

Int: OK, come back, sit down. OK, come back, sit, sit, sit, sit. Great OK, so you don't like it.
Boy 1: 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, boys group, state school: CC study: all white)

Girl: They're sickly, they're horrible! I hate them, I've always, always, always hated Barbies.
(Year 6, mixed group, private school: white girl)

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

Girl 1: Our friend does that with Barbies.
Girl 2: Yeah, she microwaves them.
Int (PGW): 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 neighbour's garden.
(Year 6, mixed group, private school: CC study: All white)

Int (PGW): 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 6, mixed group, state school: CC study: all white)

We asked the children why Barbie tended to be treated in this way and a variety of explanations emerged. Barbie was hated because she is seen as babyish, as unfashionable, as plastic, as having multiple selves and she is seen as an icon of femininity. There was also a sense in which it was seen as 'cool' to destroy Barbie, or even that this was the norm: violent destruction was simply what one did with Barbies (Rogers, 1999). We concentrate here on children's talk about Barbie as an icon of femininity.

Many of the children's explanations for the apparently widespread destruction of Barbies made explicit links between Barbie and femininity:

*"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, because girls also talked about destroying Barbie, though seldom with such extreme expressions of disgust as the boys.

Int: What kind of people like Barbie?
Girl 1: Babies
Girl 2: Sissies
Girl 3: Girls, um, not babies, but really girly girls
(Year 3, girls group, private school)

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In the extract above, these 7 and 8 year old girls are trying to disentangle the concepts of babyishness ("babies"), effeminacy ("sissies") and femininity ("girly girls"). One girl utilised the term "girly girl" to describe typical consumers of Barbie, which were then represented as an extreme form of femininity: "really girly girls". Being a girl is therefore no guarantee of girlishness. As an icon of traditional masculinity, Action Man did not attract such vehement reactions, and although some children did talk about destroying Action Man toys, this was represented as a less common and less emotionally loaded activity. Typical consumers of Barbie were represented as 'girly girls', or feminine girls, and this was generally (though not always) constituted as a relatively dis-preferred identity position.

## ON NOT 'DRINKING LIKE A GIRL': YOUNG WOMEN AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

This view of femininity as a disavowed category also emerged in pilot work carried out as preliminary research for the Young People and Alcohol study. Female students' talk reflected the difficulties involved in finding a position from which to talk about drinking as a female subject. Due to ethical considerations, it is not possible to quote directly from interview extracts here. Alcohol consumption as a practice is strongly gendered as masculine, and the appropriate drinking subject is male (Lemle and Mishkind, 1989). In the pilot interviews it was not viewed as acceptable (especially by young men) for young women to "drink like a man", for example, by drinking as much as men, being able to "drink men under the table"

or by beating them at competitive drinking games. This is unsurprising. However, what was less expected was young women's talk about the undesirability of "drinking like a girl": it was not seen as acceptable to drink "ladies' drinks" in a "lady-like" way: in other words being respectable, restrained and therefore rather boring: no fun (Griffin, 2003). In this way, although young women drank alcohol alongside their male peers, and frequently drank "ladies' drinks" such as Archers, traditional respectable femininity was kept out of discourses around alcohol consumption. It was almost compulsory for young women (and young men) to drink alcohol if they wished to participate in the general social activities of student culture, but young women appeared to be caught in a dilemma in which they should not drink "like a man" or "in a lady-like way". The figure of the ladette as a possible role model for young female drinkers appeared to offer no solution to this dilemma.

Angela McRobbie has argued that young women are now able (even expected) to reject traditional forms of respectable femininity by behaving 'badly' (especially in relation to sexuality and drinking), and to retain (or "rediscover") some of the trappings of traditional respectable femininity, notably those related to marriage:

> "Young women have license now to be badly behaved (drunk, disorderly and undressed…), while at the same time they also reinhabit tradition (with some barely perceptible ironic reflection) by rediscovering with delight, rituals and customs which feminism had dispensed with,

including "hen nights", lavish white weddings, and the adoption of the male surname on marriage. But what marks out all of these cultural practices is the boldness of the activity, and the strong sense of female consent and participation, the idea that these are all personal choices." (McRobbie, 2004, p.9).

Our pilot research indicates that contemporary femininity requires young women to challenge traditional feminine respectability by taking on practices and styles associated with masculinity, and also to disavow practices that are linked to traditional forms of femininity. The former are associated with excitement and the latter with boredom or even disgust (in the case of Barbie). We would argue that some elements of the figure of the 'ladette' shape the nature of the impossible space occupied by acceptable forms of femininity: especially the avoidance of all things 'girly' and the compulsory practice of fun.

When CG interviewed young women aged 15 to 18 during the early 1980s for a study of the move from school to the job market for young women, it was commonplace for young working class women to speak of refusing alcohol in favour of soft drinks as a safeguard against the possibility of sexual harassment and assault (Griffin, 1985). Some 25 years later, that strategy is no longer so pervasive, and would be viewed as a sign of spoiling the creed of compulsory 'fun' that is now an essential part of young people's leisure. If Cyndi Lauper sang in the 1980s that "girls just wanna have fun", the song would now go "girls just gotta have fun". Drinking is increasingly constituted as a compulsory

part of youth leisure cultures, and this means drinking in order to have what adverts for a number of ready-mixed drinks (RMDs) refer to as "the best time of your lives". So young women must drink alcohol if they wish to socialise, but if they can neither drink like a 'man' or a like a 'girl', it is not clear what spaces contemporary femininity offers young women from which to drink alcohol - and hence to participate in social life with their peers.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For both the identity positions of the 'tomboy' and the 'ladette', the appropriation of masculinity is linked to rejection of traditional femininity with its associations of white middle class respectability. The 'tomboy' position is only available as an acceptable identity for pre-teen girls as an 'honorary boy' identity position that must be outgrown around the time of puberty or a girl will risk being categorised as lesbian. The link with consumption practices lies in the fact that many of these identity positions were constituted as style categories in girls' (and boys') talk in the research studies cited above. So it was hypothetically possible for a girl to move from being a 'tomboy', and having "boy clothes", to being a girl or even a 'girly girl'. The latter group were not universally aspired to: they frequently (though not always) appeared to be tainted with the mark of 'girly' femininity.

Consumption is one of the key sites (though it is by no means the only such site) through which the contemporary disavowal of femininity is played out and struggled with by girls and young women. In this paper we have

argued that one of the most significant difficulties facing girls and young women in this regard is finding an identity position from which to 'do' contemporary femininity as a consuming subject. The disavowal of "drinking like a girl" has some parallels with girls' disparaging references to 'girly girls' in the Young Consumers study, and the disparaging references to typical consumers of Barbie in the Child Consumers project. The unstable and age-specific position of the 'tomboy' and the risk of being seen as a 'slag' or a lesbian have their parallels in young women's talk about trying to match their male peers in drinking competitions. If they failed to keep up with the men, they had failed as drinkers; and if they succeeded, they had failed as women. We can therefore apply this principle to the constitution of contemporary femininity as follows: young women must perform (heterosexual) femininity if they wish to participate in social life, but if they wish to avoid occupying positions as 'tomboys', as 'slags' or as 'girly girls', what spaces are on offer from which to 'do' feminine subjectivity? The sassiness of the fun-loving, independent and assertive girl or the lager-loving ladette may appear to present 'new' and up-to-date models that are more progressive than earlier images of 'nice' respectable girlhood. This apparent independence and freedom is continually undermined by the tightness of her crop top, the thumb she keeps over the top of the bottle she drinks out of in case it might have been spiked, and the location of feminism as somewhere in the past, irrelevant to her life of easy-going freely chosen consumption.

**NOTES**

1. The Child Consumers project commenced in 2005 and is ongoing. The initial stages have been funded by a University of Bath Faculty Research Development Fund grant, entitled 'Consumption symbolism and its role in the lives of children aged 7 to 11'. Co-researchers are Dr Agnes Nairn and Patricia Gaya Wickes (School of Management, University of Bath).

2. The Young Consumers project was funded by an ESRC award (ref. R000239287-A) from 1999 to 2005, entitled 'Consuming identities: Young people, cultural forms and negotiations in households'. The research team comprised Professor Ann Phoenix and Dr Rosaleen Croghan (Open University) and Janine Hunter (University of Birmingham).

3. The Young People and Alcohol project is also funded by the ESRC (ref. RES-148-25-0021), and entitled 'Branded consumption and social identification: Young people and alcohol'. The research team includes Dr Andrew Bengry-Howell (Bath University), Professor Chris Hackley (Royal Holloway, London University), Dr Willm Mistral (Mental Health R & D Unit, Bath University/Avon Mental Health Trust), Dr Isabelle Szmigin and Dr David Clarke (Birmingham University). The project is part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Research programme, coordinated by Professor Margaret Wetherell (Open University).

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